Virus Discourse: The Rhetoric of Threat and Terrorism in the Biothriller

Mayer, Ruth, 1965-

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Contagion and contamination, diseases and epidemics, germs, bacteria, and viruses have always been apt metaphors for processes and objects of border crossing, travel, and migration. As studies such as William McNeill’s *Plagues and People*, Sheldon Watts’ *Epidemics and History*, and Alan M. Kraut’s *Silent Traveler: Germs, Genes, and the “Immigrant Menace”* exemplify, the trope of infection is an integral part of the discourse of cultural contact. But these days, the imagery has changed; in a new guise it seems to lend itself exemplarily to the discursive needs of the age of globalization. What seems to be at stake in this revision is the very conceptualization of the border since the idea of a clear-cut boundary between “us” and “them,” “self” and “other,” “here” and “there” is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. And while all kinds of infectious and contagious agents still are being called up in the fearful evocations of hostile intruders and terrorist “sleepers,” significantly enough it is the virus that has gained center stage in the current speculations about life in the contact zone.

Virus discourse in its current form invaded the cultural unconscious of our day with the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s (see Singer 1993; Treichler 1989; Weingart 2002). The particular protean character of the virus, its capacity to invade a foreign “body” on the sly and use the host’s metabolism to self-replicate, allows for its spread into many fields of cultural expression and exchange that have nothing to do with immunology or virology proper. Hence, whenever two or more systems of signification interact, the trope of the virus is likely to enter the scene—as a trope of interrelation, mix-up, complication, subtlety, and subversion.1

In what follows, I will trace some of the implications of this imagery in contemporary discourse—in particular in contemporary discussions and reflections on terrorism, where the concrete and the
metaphorical dimensions of virus discourse overlap and interact in a
classical manner. Doing so, I am not—or am only marginally—
interested in the actual shifts and reconceptualizations taking place
in contemporary medical discourse. What shall concern me is the
appropriation of medical—particularly of viral—discourse in popular
narratives of our day. I am interested in the biothriller genre, which
time and again professes to bridge the gap between fantasy and real-
ity, fictional speculation and scientific insight. At times, such narra-
tive texts do indeed manage to blur the boundary between fact and
fiction, as when their fictional enactments show markedly political
effects in the real world: thus, President Clinton was so very im-
pressed by Richard Preston’s biothriller *The Cobra Event* that he re-
commended the book to his advisors and high Pentagon officials, and
took it as an incentive to intensify military measures to respond to
the dangers of bioterrorism. Yet even where no such clear-cut reciprocity
between the world of politics and the world of popular
fiction can be recorded, biothrillers can be seen to have an important
cultural function. I argue that they should be taken as testimonial of
larger transformations in our political unconscious. Contemporary
biothrillers, organized around the trope of the virus, register a pervasive
shift in the conceptualization of threat, a shift I associate with the
advent of the global age, as will become clear.

I start from the assumption that fictional texts get a better grip on
rearrangements and transformations in public discourse than nonfic-
tional accounts, because they map out the world in speculative terms
and thus address dimensions of the political unconscious that more
solution-oriented political and journalistic approaches to the same
phenomena tend to reason away or repress. Thus, it is precisely the
markedly fantastic dimension of fiction that makes it such an apt
medium to reflect on current fears and fascinations. This also means
that, for my purposes, it is irrelevant whether a novel’s or film’s scientific
scenario corresponds with scientific theory—in fact, many of
the texts I am going to explore come close to absurdity when assessed
in terms of scientific plausibility. It is, after all, not their relevance for
scientific discourse I find remarkable but their role within a currently
emerging discourse on communication, contact, and contamination
that deviates to a considerable extent from the earlier patterns of con-
ceiving and enacting these concepts.
NUCLEAR WARFARE VERSUS BIOTERRORISM:
THE END OF CONTAINMENT

In his 2002 popular science treatise on bioterrorism and military research on biochemical warfare, *The Demon in the Freezer*, the American bestselling author Richard Preston quotes a conversation with Ken Alibek, the former deputy chief of research and production of the Soviet biological-weapons program Biopreparat. Alibek is annoyed that leading scientists worldwide profess not to believe in the efficiency of biological weapons: “I can say I don’t believe that nuclear weapons work. Nuclear weapons destroy everything. Biological weapons are more . . . beneficial. They don’t destroy buildings, they only destroy vital activity.” “Vital activity?” Preston asks. “People,” explains the expert (239).

Some pages before, Preston cites Major General John Parker, head of the U.S. Army Medical Research and Material Command Office at the time of the interview. Referring to the anthrax attacks on the House of Representatives in 2001, Parker comments, “The letter was a missile. The address was the coordinates of the missile, and the post office did a good job of making sure it got to ground zero” (214).

These statements bring to light an interesting pattern: Preston’s book, as well as a whole series of other recent publications on biological warfare and bioterrorism, retain the language of nuclear threat and Cold War containment while evoking a considerably more sophisticated threat scenario. The new mechanisms of warfare, this logic runs, supersede the military strategies of yesterday in subtlety, slyness, and perversion.³ Biological weapons do not destroy indiscriminately like atom bombs, they work less crudely, on the basis of civil structures that are appropriated and inverted. In popular science books and journalistic pieces, this rhetorical and conceptual pattern has led to disastrous consequences—most obviously in the debates around a “preemptive strike” against Iraq in 2002—when time and again the conclusion was reached that established structures of supervision, containment, and control were not up to the emergent dangers. In the times of global terrorism, Preston argued in line with the Bush administration, new methods of gaining, processing, and reviewing information, and new protocols to act on the grounds of such information, are needed.⁴
Of course, the current panic about an immediate and nonlocalizable danger could just as well be fed by imageries of nuclear threat (and, indeed, after September 11, 2001, one recurrent scenario of fear envisioned the explosion of an atom bomb planted by terrorists in a Western city, or a terrorist attack on a nuclear power plant). Yet, significantly enough, it was bioterrorist horror visions such as the ones described by Preston that proved to be the most popular fear material—tales of anthrax spores, smallpox viruses, and numerous other agents waiting to be released from Saddam’s famous underground laboratories were eagerly lapped up by the networks of media, politics, and gossip in the Western hemisphere. As Philipp Sarasin recently showed, even before the anthrax scare in the wake of September 11, high government officials in the United States were busily reinterpreting the terrorist threat in terms of bioterrorism. On these grounds, he argues, “anthrax” was then enacted as a “media virus”: “This was not about facts, but about drawing most effective connections between certain signifiers. . . . evidence was created by time and again rearranging, repeating and interrelating the same words” (58–59; my translation).

Even if not all of these scenarios of death, destruction, and disaster are organized around viruses, the (trope of) the virus takes center stage in them. Most importantly, current scenarios of threat increasingly revolve around the suspicion that containment no longer works, or rather, that measures of containment need to be updated and refined. Andrew Ross has distinguished two meanings of containment in American political thought since the Cold War:

The first speaks to a threat outside of the social body, a threat that therefore has to be excluded, or isolated in quarantine, and kept at bay from the domestic body. The second meaning of containment, which speaks to the domestic contents of the social body, concerns the threat internal to the host which must then be neutralized by being fully absorbed. (46)

One could argue that the second usage of the term “containment,” allowing for the idea of an “enemy in our midst,” has in the meantime taken over popular discourse to an extent that the very notion of containment—which rests, after all, on the assumption of an inside and an outside, inclusion and exclusion—is becoming increasingly untenable these days. This is not to say, obviously, that our world has
completely abandoned the idea of binary oppositions and inside/outside constellations—the phobic rhetoric of othering instrumentalized in the second Iraq War certainly gives evidence that the blunt logic of “us” versus “them” is far from defunct. Still, the most fearful suggestion in contemporary representations of terrorism, warfare, and other national and international conflict scenarios is that self and other have become indistinguishable. A speech delivered by Richard N. Haass, then acting as a representative of the U.S. Department of State (which he has since left), on October 15, 2001, exemplifies this associative pattern:

Another way of looking at the challenge is to view international terrorism as analogous to a terrible, lethal virus. Terrorism lives as part of the environment. Sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent, it is always present in some form. Like a virus, international terrorism respects no boundaries—moving from country to country, exploiting globalized commerce and communication to spread. It can be particularly malevolent when it can find a supportive host. We therefore need to take appropriate prophylactic measures at home and abroad to prevent terrorism from multiplying and check it from infecting our societies and damaging our lives. We need, for instance, better border regimes and improved international counterterrorism cooperation across the board. We also need to make sure that the virus does not mutate into something even more deadly through the acquisition of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons of mass destruction.

The challenge of terrorism is thus akin to fighting a virus in that we can accomplish a great deal but not eradicate the problem. At first glance, this speech seems to rely heavily on the first meaning of containment outlined by Andrew Ross—embracing the logic that the infected body of the state can and must be healed by way of an expulsion of the infectious and infecting Other. This is what Haass’s list of suggested “prophylactic” measures seems to indicate in its emphasis on supervision, control, and containment. But significantly enough, Haass feels the need to leave this reasoning behind at one point. While he does try to differentiate rigorously between what is healthy (and “ours”) and what is sick (and “theirs”), the viral imagery he uses runs counter to this clear-cut dichotomy, so that a second layer of significance enters his talk. The notion of a viral agent that was always there, if dormant for a period of time, calls to mind a scenario much more frightening than the one of the body politic about
to be infected by alien pathogens—it gives scope to a world in which the very distinctions between “us” and “them,” “healthy” and “sick,” “inside” and “outside” seem to be at stake. “They” live among us, they are “educated, some at universities in the West,” “some of them enjoyed [life in the suburbs] along with afternoons at the gym, rum and cokes by night, and trips to Las Vegas”—and then all of a sudden they turn against “us” and lash out.

It is on these grounds that Haass then quotes President Bush’s insight that “we are now engaged in . . . ‘a different kind of war. It’s not the kind of war that we’re used to in America.’” Stemming from October 2001, this statement refers to the situation in the United States after the terrorist attacks. The scenario of threat that emanates from Haass’s talk and Bush’s statement is striking because it echoes a diagnosis by Jean Baudrillard, who wrote about the events of September 11 that they brought to the fore a new, “fantastical” enemy and an antagonism that “is everywhere and . . . in each of us.” “Terrorism,” continues Baudrillard in a characteristic mixture between disgust and fascination, “like viruses, is everywhere.” Baudrillard draws on the trope of the virus to envision a fundamental pathology embedded within a system: “The West, in its Godlike position, becomes suicidal and declares war on itself.”

If we take this thought seriously, however, then the viral force appears not so much disruptive or subversive but rather to be the operative principle of the postmodern world order. Seen through the lens of these reflections, Haass’s speech, too, seems to allow for an independent momentum in its implementation of the rhetoric of virulence. By this token, Haass’s talk comes amazingly close to Baudrillard’s apocalyptic insight that the new conflict might indeed be irresolvable, because it does not so much pit system against system but presents a system eroding from within. This is an insight that Haass does not face up to—he ends with a reinstalled, firm dichotomy between the freedom-loving West and the despotic and hateful rest, which then paves the way for a final call to action. But the very fact that the pattern of thought makes its way into the political speech may testify to its power. In what follows, I would like to delineate what this logic entails and how it works in popular culture—or, to be more precise, in the biothriller, where it is enacted much more sweepingly than in political discourse. Before I turn to the fictional enactments of
the virus, however, I would like to discuss another principle of the virus central to my argument, which is its ambivalence, its defiance of all kinds of stable categories and concepts. To turn to Richard Preston once more: “A virus is not strictly alive, but it is certainly not dead” (2002, 33).

There are several lineages to take into account if one wants to trace the career of virus imagery in contemporary cultural theory. For purposes that will become clear, I will not focus on fantastic or celebratory approaches to the trope of the virus, as taken by writers such as William Burroughs or the Canadian theorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker. Pursuing a different track, the European scholars Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argued that one should turn to the logic of virulence—and its implications of contagion and the epidemic—to imagine a subversive “order” of infiltration, takeover, and spread rather than an order of “filiation by heredity” (241, 242). The logic of contagion, they hold, interlinks; it crisscrosses and overrides established categories; it disregards the borderlines and grids of an established system of meaning making.

“Viruses,” writes the philosopher Keith Ansell Pearson in 1997, with direct reference to this pattern of thought, “serve to challenge almost every dogmatic tenet in our thinking about the logic of life, defying any tidy division of the physical, such as we find in Kant, for example, into organisms, the inorganic, and engineered artifacts” (133). The virus, which may work its way from species to species through contaminated secretions or excretions and which is capable of changing the genetic material it comes into contact with, attests to a protean versatility that is further emphasized once the ambivalent nature of the pathogen—between life and death—comes into view. This ambivalence turns the virus into a perfect trope to envision contemporary world-political developments and interactions.

At this moment, the parameters of the viral are particularly appropriate for a state-of-the-art description because, more obviously than ever before, the most diverse developments of our day—from politics to economy to culture—present themselves as too complex to be
captured in terms of individualized control. Moreover, the category of the viral allows for a neutral conceptualization of the current situation: while suggesting a subversive thrust, viruses are not as easily romanticized as, say, guerilla fighters or rebels. But on the other hand, the figure of the virus does not lend itself to easy demonization either: the virus is, after all, a manipulative force rather than the good or the bad guy; it is a way of functioning, an agency, confusing and variegated. The virus is an ambivalent thing, an in-between creature, subject to the logic of mutation that lets a pathogenic effect suddenly flip over into an apathogenic one. It thus effectively undermines the binaries of healthy/ill, good/bad, and harmless/dangerous. And while many of the intricate insights of virology and immunology do not make their way into the popular imaginary, many others do, since viral threats such as H.I.V., smallpox, S.A.R.S. or the avian flu are discussed almost daily in the press, on TV, or in popular entertainment, rendering the virus—more than other pathogenic microbes—a powerful presence in the public imagery of threat and an elementary part of contemporary debates around global contact and global contamination. This is why in the readings that follow I will also take all kinds of nonviral infectious agents into consideration, focusing on the “metaphorical use” of the term “virus” that Brigitte Weingart exemplarily described (82)—a metaphorical use that is often transferred well beyond the immediate medical scope of viral discourse.

**CONTAINMENT VERSUS SPREAD**

The emphasis on the infectious agent’s inherent ambivalence has fully entered the virus thriller only recently. The classical Cold War thriller by and large operated on different premises, even where the same basic theme—contagion and contamination—was being addressed. To give one example, in the film *Panic in the Streets,* a classical Cold War take on the issue of immigration, politico-medical supervision, and infection, an illegal alien unknowingly carries pneumonic plague into the United States and thus threatens to trigger a large-scale epidemic. Only thanks to the joint efforts of military and civil authorities can the danger of an epidemic be contained. In a focal scene in the film, the film’s hero, Lieutenant Commander Dr. Clinton Reed of
the Public Health Service (played by Richard Widmark), is faced with a journalist who has been hard on his heels ever since he found out about the outbreak. The journalist confronts him directly, and Reed—unfamiliar with the tricks of the trade—discloses what he knows, appealing to the journalist’s discretion: “It isn’t smallpox and it isn’t cholera. It’s plague, pneumonic plague. . . . That’s why we can’t let you have the story.” Yet the media representative does not adhere to the code of honor laid out by the government official: “Can’t let me print it? Since when have you been making the rules?” Reed’s weak rejoinder—“I represent the public health service”—does not convince him at all: “I represent the public and they got a right to know what’s going on.”

Fortunately, Reed’s partner, the much more worldly police captain Tom Warren (Paul Douglas), still manages to uphold the media blackout by having the journalist detained. Clearly, to fight the epidemic in this Cold War period piece is just as much about containing the spread of information as it is about containing the virus. The solution to the problem consists in keeping the infectious agent outside the system. By extension, the contradistinction of the bad world of disease, illegal immigration, and crime, and the good world of the civil authorities, the health service, and the police is never seriously doubted. Yet in a globalized world order, the boundary between “outside” and “inside” has become precarious, and the forces and devices of good and evil have become remarkably similar.

Almost fifty years after Panic in the Streets, in another biographical thriller, Wolfgang Petersen’s Outbreak (1995), Tom’s warning about letting the media in on what is happening will be echoed almost verbatim: “We have to proceed with conventional containment,” says another military physician, Major General McClintock, in this film, “and you have to maintain an absolute media blackout. Control your subordinates.” The big difference is, however, that by this time in the film, McClintock, played by Donald Sutherland, has been firmly established as the bad guy. His counterpart, the virologist and Center for Disease Control representative Dr. Sam Daniels, played by Dustin Hoffman, will consequently proceed to do precisely what he has been told not to—and behave just like the journalist in Panic in the Streets—by going on the air in all possible ways, from hijacking an army helicopter to forcing his way into a TV station and broadcasting in guerilla fashion the
news of the outbreak across the nation. He acts, in other words, just like the virus, which does, at a focal moment in the film, mutate and become airborne.12

These days, virus thrillers clearly no longer go for the logic of containment, and the virus has come to set the mode of action rather than figure only as a negative backdrop. By dint of this logic everything revolves around the imagery of viral spread. To cite just one of many possible examples—in Richard Preston’s influential virus thriller The Cobra Event we are familiarized with the mind frame of a mad terrorist with brainpox viruses in his hands:

He imagined brainpox turning New York City into a hot bioreactor, a simmering cauldron of amplifying virus. From there brainpox would amplify itself outward along invisible lines, following airline routes, spanning the globe. New York was the seed bioreactor, the cooker that would start the other cities going. This was not exactly the revenge of the rain forest; this was the revenge of molecular biology. From New York, brainpox would rocket to London and Tokyo, and it would fly to Lagos, Nigeria, and it would land in Shanghai and Singapore, and it would amplify through Calcutta, and it would get to São Paulo and Mexico City and Dacca in Bangladesh and Djakarta in Indonesia and all the great supercities of the earth. The cities would go hot, for a while. (209)

Of course, there are numerous precedents for such monomaniacal visions of world rule by means of sinister schemes in popular thrillers of the preglobalization period. Yet the imagery of spread that suffuses this passage is still significant: the viral release triggers a movement with a momentum of its own, an outburst that rockets to span the globe and that challenges the very notion of nation-state authorities and individual, local (re)actions—and consequently calls for responses on a similar scale. The scenario might call to mind the famous scene in Outbreak in which Donald Sutherland simulates the spread of the disease on a screen for the leaders of the country—but then the film’s narrative is based on, among other sources, a book by Richard Preston. In both popular virus thrillers, the spread is seen to defy the logic of containment, and it requires means of action other than the networks of down-to-earth male solidarity and decency that Kazan’s film envisions as the solution to the threat. But before we turn to the means of fighting the virus, let us turn to the perpetrators depicted in the virus thriller—and thus return to the issue of bioterrorism.
BIOTERRORISM AND THE VIRUS THRILLER

In his bioterrorist thriller *Vector*, Robin Cook, next to Richard Preston the leading figure in the field of bestselling medical thrillers, envisions a series of anthrax attacks by mail in New York City. The novel was published in 1999, two years before reality caught up with Cook’s plot. As the editors of a special volume of *American Literary History* on “Contagion and Culture” write, the novel “underscores [the relationship] among culture, disease transmission, and politics” (Wald, Tomes, and Lynch, 617). They then go on to place Cook’s novel in the context of economic globalization, focusing on the figure of the victim of the first anthrax attack, a Greek immigrant, Jason Papparis, who owns a wholesale rug business:

> Although anthrax is not a contagious disease, as we all know by now, the plot of *Vector* illustrates how central all disease has been to our understanding and experience of culture. Appearing as an advertisement, the fatal letter suggests connections among consumer culture, transmissible disease, and the postal service (and, by implication, the infrastructure of the whole communications network in the US). The ostensibly arbitrary choice of Papparis turns out to result in fact from his occupation. Because he imports rugs from Turkey, where “the animal form of anthrax was a problem” (62), his contraction of anthrax will not raise suspicions about the source of the disease. It will be assumed, or so the perpetrators hope, to be the result of an occupational hazard, a symptom, in effect, of globalization. (617–18)

While this is an interesting observation in its own right, for my purposes another twist of the novel’s plot is at least as interesting as the criteria for choosing the victim: the criteria for choosing the perpetrator. The attack on the Greek trader is carried out by the Russian taxi driver Yuri Davydov, whom Cook equips with a spectacular biography: we learn that he used to be a technician in the biochemical manufacturing facility in Sverdlovsk, which was part of the Soviet bioweapons program Biopreparat. Cook makes Yuri a central protagonist in an actual event—a fatal accident that took place in the laboratory in Sverdlovsk in 1979, when a plume of anthrax dust was released from the anthrax pulverizers into the environment, killing at least sixty-six people. Years after the incident and after the collapse of the Eastern bloc, we learn further, Yuri has moved to New York City,
where he now lives with his African American wife, Connie, in a colony of Russian emigrants in Brighton Beach. His dissatisfaction with life in the United States finds a fatal projection surface when he gets to know a right-wing militia called the People’s Aryan Army and appropriates their project for his own purposes. The right-wing terrorists, who detest the Russian, want him to prepare a major anthrax attack on New York City, for which the Greek rug dealer serves as a test case.

In view of this scenario, Robin Cook’s question, formulated in an “Author’s Note,” seems only too justified: He worries about what became of the experts who were trained in the bioweapons facilities of the Soviet Union:

The program purportedly has been dismantled by the Yeltsin government (although many experts fear not completely), resulting in a diaspora of tens of thousands of highly trained bioweapon personnel. Considering Russia’s current economic dislocations, the question invariably arises: where are these people now and what are they doing? Some, perhaps, are driving taxis in New York City like Yuri Davydov, the disaffected émigré in Vector, and meeting up with equally disaffected members of the violent far right. (388)

These reflections make it sound as if the Russian experts were a particularly dangerous form of hazardous material left over from the Cold War experiments with biological warfare—and it is precisely along these lines that Yuri is enacted in the novel. The Russian immigrant is being used like a weapon by the American militia. The right-wing terrorists believe that they can control Yuri, just like Yuri believes that he is capable of controlling his anthrax, and they kill him as soon as his mission is accomplished, and the anthrax produced. Yet, they do not know that Yuri on his part tried to get the better of them. Due to deceptive maneuvers on both sides, the terrorists will not survive either. In the end, they open a letter that purportedly contains Yuri’s last instructions. A puff of white dust rises . . .

Yet if the perpetrators proceed—and die—more or less accidentally, their counterparts are not much better off. The medical examiner Jack Stapleton, who acts as a classical detective figure in the novel, finds out what happens by pure coincidence and only when it is too late to take to action. The fact that the disaster is being prevented is based on lucky circumstances, not the deliberate and careful intervention of an individualist mastermind. Although anthrax is
caused by bacteria rather than a virus, the entire rhetoric of the novel presents the infectious agent in terms of the versatility and liminality that characterizes popular virus discourse. Good and bad guys drift along, reacting rather than acting, and it is the infectious agent that seems—just like the virus in *Outbreak*—to set the mode of action. Moreover, the entire conflict appears strangely devoid of ideological motives; it takes its departure from the Cold War layout but then turns into a scenario of more-or-less personal disgruntlement (even the Aryan Army’s racism is cast in psychological rather than political terms). We never learn what the right-wingers or Yuri actually want to achieve aside from confusion and chaos. The dichotomy of villains and heroes collapses just like the dichotomy of clear-cut systems or spaces. Bioterrorism seems to run on its own—tautologically and systematically, very much along the lines envisioned by Baudrillard.

**GLOBAL CONTAGION**

Although clearly situated in a seemingly “postideological” contemporary world of fragmented identity struggles, personal grievances, and anxieties about fragmentation and loss of meaning, it is no accident that *Vector* makes recourse to the world of the Cold War to map its scenario of threat in the first place. Against the backdrop of the old order, with its clear-cut boundaries and ideological premises, the new dangers seem all the more frightening since they are so diffuse, pointless, and self-propelling. None of the many villains in *Outbreak* and *Vector* is really in control of the events, which unfold with a momentum of their own. If Anthony Hickox’s 2001 film *Contaminated Man* chooses the exact same perspective, this might already be an indication that here, too, viral imagery is used to emphasize the discontinuity between the old and the new order. Whereas *Outbreak* could be called a film about the impact of globalization within the United States, *Contaminated Man* is about the role of the United States abroad—if this distinction between interior and exterior still makes sense in a film set in Hungary, with a cast of American actors who play characters who almost invariably turn out to be related or otherwise connected by past events at some point during the film. The film was by no means as successful as its blockbuster predecessor, but it exemplarily
enacts the same logic of global threat as so many biothrillers on TV and in the book racks of airports and train stations. Set in the 1990s, the film maps out the new constellations of economic and political power that came about with the collapse of the Eastern bloc. Again, as in Vector, the film revolves around the fate of a biochemical technician who used to work for a secret bioweapons plant in the old days and now gets caught up in the machinery of a global economy. In the film’s present time, the plant has been taken over by an American multinational company that does what was always done—it secretly produces bioweapons, now under the auspices of the American National Security Agency. The technician, Josef Müller, played by Peter Weller, loses his job and, while raising the issue with his boss, inadvertently blows up the lab. Only Müller manages to escape—infected with Trinoxin 3, the virus produced by the company and set free in the altercation. Infected, he sets across the country to meet his wife and son. In the film’s complicatedly absurd logic, the toxin is not immediately fatal to its carrier; he could be saved if vaccinated soon enough. But the people that come into touch with him are not so lucky. They die immediately and gruesomely.

“How do you stop a walking one-man time bomb?” asks the film’s trailer, which is the wrong question. In the film itself, the risk is described much more appropriately: Müller is named “a walking one-man plague” by David Whitman (William Hurt), the U.N. immunologist and hazardous materials expert who pursues him on his mad course through Hungary. Indeed, the shift in metaphor from time bomb to infectious disease indicates the film’s central conflict: a suicide bomber knows what he is doing, while the carrier of an infectious disease may be entirely unaware of his dangerous luggage. Contaminated Man takes up the scenario of Panic in the Street, albeit translocated on different ground.

But if Panic in the Street is about keeping the foreign body out of one’s own territory, Contaminated Man demonstrates from the beginning that the categories of “foreign” and “familiar” no longer make sense. At the outset of the action in Hungary, we see Whitman recover a barrel of hazardous material from a lake. The barrel carries the colors of the U.S. flag, which throughout the film comes to be associated both with a contaminating influence and with the source of therapeutic intervention. The most striking—if not exactly original—symbol
for this mix-up in the film might very well not be Trinoxin or any other toxin but rather Coca Cola. Whitman chides his partner—and lover-to-be—not to “contaminate” her beautiful body with the stuff, and we later see the despairing Müller put a sample of his blood into a coca cola bottle to infect the water reservoir of Budapest. Clearly Whitman’s counterpart in the film, the National Security agent Wyler, who is convinced that all the turmoil attests to a communist plot, is blinded by his outdated conspiracy thinking. The new and present conspiracies are much more complicated than the Cold War plottings, and they revolve around commercial issues, not competing ideologies.

Thus Contaminated Man presents the intermixture of different spaces, the collapsing of world orders, and the tight conjunction of consumption and contamination as frightening in terms of disorientation and loss of control. As its investigators learn, the threat does not emanate from the exterior, from a faraway country, or a foreign body (as most biothrillers, from Panic in the Street to Outbreak, still insist) but stems from back home: Trinoxin was first developed in a U.S. lab. This sense of a thoroughly internalized aggressor is already driven home in the film’s opening scene: In Los Angeles, we see the immunologist Whitman, after a day in the lab, return home to his family, kiss his wife, and caress his sleeping daughter. Shortly afterward, his wife is in convulsions and his daughter starts coughing. Whitman, we learn later, has been working with and was infected by the very toxin that many years later will infect another father, Müller, in Hungary. The power of the virus turns out to be inseparably and infamously connected with an essential part of our own system that cannot be controlled or isolated. “The conspiracy-minded fear of being taken over by the enemy thus mutates into the viral fear that you have become the enemy of your own self,” as Peter Knight summarizes this logic in his study on postmodern conspiracy thinking (Knight 2000, 278–79n15; see also Knight 2001).

CONCLUSION

Although none of the films or novels investigated here enact virus threats exclusively or primarily in terms of a military or terrorist project, it is precisely on such terms—which “culturalize” the viral and
thus turn it into an integral element of the global order after the Cold War—that inform recent popular science writing and military-strategical measures. The new conflicts and threats, this logic runs, may look foreign but they are acted out and have their impact in our very midst—and often enough appear deeply interlinked with what we conceive of as our own. Thus the only way to keep up with the viral agents at large is to establish ever more subtle and pervasive mechanisms of intervention. As the cycles of action and reaction, contamination and containment follow in ever faster succession, to distinguish between the healthy and the diseased, the normal and the aberrant, the threat and the defense becomes ever more difficult.

Jacques Derrida, comparing the logic of terrorism to the principle of autoimmunity, “where a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its ‘own’ immunity,” (2003, 94), evokes the ultimate scenario of threat when he envisions a world in which the threat itself has become the ruling paradigm:

The “total threat” . . . no longer comes from a state but from anonymous forces that are absolutely unforeseeable and incalculable. And since this absolute threat will have been secreted by the end of the Cold War and the “victory” of the U.S. camp, since it threatens what is supposed to sustain world order, the very possibility of a world and of any worldwide effort [mondialisation] (international law, a world market, a universal language, and so on), what is thus put at risk by this terrifying autoimmunitary logic is nothing less than the existence of the world, of the worldwide itself. . . . What will never let itself be forgotten is thus the perverse effect of the autoimmunitary itself. For we now know that repression in both its psychoanalytical sense and its political sense—whether it be through the police, the military, or the economy—ends up producing, reproducing, and generating the very thing it seeks to disarm. (98–99)

Notes

1. For a systematic delineation of the dimensions of contemporary virus discourse, see Mayer and Weingart 2004, where we outline the concept of the virus as a “collective symbol” in the sense of discourse analyst Jürgen Link (1988). Collective symbols function, according to Link, as a means of interlinking and negotiating the increasingly differentiated special and specializing discourses of our time. See also Ed Cohen’s reflections on the imagery of immunity, which delineate the
history of the legal and medical concept “immunity” as marking “as contradictory and under negotiation the complex boundary conditions that delimit inside from outside, citizen from alien, self from other, immunity from community” (2003, 158). While I do not entirely agree with Cohen’s analysis of present-day changes in immunological models of thought, I find his reflections on the functions and workings of metaphors in scientific discourse most convincing.

2. For a more detailed analysis of the tangled affair around Preston’s book, Clinton’s reaction to it, and the larger consequences of this interaction see Miller, Engelberg, and Broad 2002, 237–38. See also Philipp Sarasin’s fascinating “Anthrax,” Bioterror als Phantasma (71–102). Lisa Lynch recounts another tale of immediate interaction between literature and politics in “The Neo/Bio/Colonial Hot Zone.” See also Dougherty 2001.

3. For three examples among many, see Miller, Engelberg, and Broad 2002; Langbein, Skalnik, and Smolek 2002; and Garrett 1994.

4. The debates around the second Iraq War have demonstrated how powerful this logic is. While, obviously, the large-scale bioweapons programs, which were assumed to be still running in Iraq at the outset of the war, did not exist (so that the UN politics of supervision and containment to all appearances did work), the rhetoric of biological threat on its own proved powerful enough to override important objections and to legitimate the war for many. On this development and the importance of viral discourse involved in it, see Watts 2004 and Sarasin 2004.

5. On Haass’s career during the last years, and his growing opposition to the Bush administration, see Brian Urquhart’s review of Haass’s The Opportunity in The New York Review of Books. See also Haass 2005, 53–75, for a more recent version of his idea of the viral nature of terrorism (especially 58–59).

6. Translations from article in Le Monde by author.

7. Neither will I focus on cyberpunk writing such as Greg Bear’s Darwin’s Radio (1999), another highly celebratory turn to virus imagery and to the notion of mutation. See for this text Lynch 2001; Schell 2002. By contrast to Lynch and Schell, I do not assume that a “generic collapse” (Lynch) has taken place in the science fiction genre, which distinguishes writing such as Bear’s from (phobic) virus thrillers. As will become clear, I argue that both fields of writing—newer science fictions and more traditional virus thrillers—purport a resemanticization of the viral, which admittedly takes a more dramatically positive turn in Bear’s writing than in virus thrillers.

8. Catherine Belling has traced a similar pattern of thought with respect to the popular enactment of microbes in general: “narratives about interactions between microbes and people,” she writes, “lead readers to imagine themselves in relation to nonhuman spatial and temporal scales. These scales, the narratives imply, may conceal plots in which human individual subjectivity is endangered” (86). By overriding the very distinctions between “good” and “bad,” “hero” and “villain,” some recent virus thrillers go even further than such representations of “the microbe as anthropomorphic subject, whether as protagonist or as villain” (86), as I will show.

10. Michael Rogin has demarcated some much more ambivalent dimensions in Cold War movies and thus showed that several films of the period already contained the germ of a pervasive critique of the system of their day (268–71). For my purposes, however, it should suffice to focus on the standard filmic enactment of what Andrew Ross rightfully called “the most overdetermined of all the Cold War discourses”—immunology (47).


12. For a detailed reading of this film, see my *Artificial Africas*, 260–65.

13. Prefaces, author’s notes, and epilogues have an interesting generic function in bio- and virus thrillers. Like many of his colleagues, Robin Cook uses this part of his book for a direct appeal to his readers, stressing the up-to-dateness, plausibility, and realistic dimension of his fiction. The novel is thus stylized into a handbook for the real event, and the narrative serves as a case study: “In *Vector*, medical examiners were the first to confront an occurrence of bioterrorism in the form of a single case of anthrax. Lamentably, since there was a simple but unverified explanation for the case in the story, the doctors’ index of suspicion of bioterrorism was not adequate for them to insist on proper follow-up. If they had, the event as it unfolded could possibly have been prevented. This is an important lesson” (389).


15. It is only the Americans, however, that are part of this network. The Hungarians and Germans involved in the film’s plot are outside of it; they figure as pawns in the globalized order—just as the Africans did in *Outbreak*. A global web of relations, as we all know by now, does not necessarily mean that everybody is connected.

16. Other filmic examples are *Quiet Killer* (UK, 1992); *Pandora’s Clock* (U.S. 1996), *Contagious* (U.S. 1997), *Fatal Error* (U.S. 1999), all of them TV movies that came out around the time of *Outbreak*’s success and center on the theme of a viral outbreak and the authorities’ measures toward containment.

**Works Cited**


