

The Plague (1992). From Albert Camus to Luis Puenzo

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Summary

The Plague shows how a city's life is disrupted after an epidemic of plague has been declared. However, the film goes much further than this and reflects how disaster and misfortune can release people's better feelings and attitudes to struggle against adversity and survive a situation they consider unjust. The main character, Dr. Rieux, remains in the city because to flee would be to desert, and he truly feels the need to fight against such appalling circumstances brought about by the bubonic plague, a plague able to banish the hopes and cull the lives of hundreds of innocent people. Fear stalks the streets but as well as Dr. Rieux there are others willing to stay and combat the horror. The common efforts finally manage to vanquish the evil, to the delight of all. Nevertheless, the doubt remains as to whether the threat remains and might spring up again some time.

Keywords: Bubonic Plague, Epidemic, Quarantine, Serum, Cinematographic Adaptation.

Technical details

Title: *The Plague*

Original Title: *La peste*

Country: Argentina, France and UK

Year: 1992

Director: Luis Puenzo

Music: Vangelis

Screenwriter: Adaptation by Luis Puenzo of the homonymous novella by Albert Camus.

Cast: William Hurt, Sandrine Bonnaire, Jean-Marc Barr, Robert Duvall, Raúl Julia, Jorge Luz, Victoria Tennant, Atilio Veronelli, Francisco Cocuzza, Laura Palmucci, Norman Erlich, Marcos Woinsky, Duilio Marzio, Pancho Ibáñez and Horacio Fontova.

Color: Color

Runtime: 104 minutes

Genre: Drama

Production Company: Compagnie Française Cinématographique, The Pepper Prince Company Ltd. and Oscar Kramer S. A., in association with Cinemania and with the participation of Canal+.

Synopsis: An epidemic of plague threatens Oran. The city is placed in quarantine and different groups of people react in very different ways to the circumstances.

The Plague (1992), by Luis Puenzo, is the first adaptation of the homonymous novel by Albert Camus. From the cinematographic point of view it was a failure and despite the cast it was not even shown in the USA, where it was distributed directly in video format. It is a disappointing adaptation and most of those familiar with the novel must find it a fiasco. The film is oppressive, tedious, slow, depressing, dark and difficult to follow. Although the plague in Camus' work is an allegory, and can also be seen as such in the film, in both we learn of so many aspects of this infectious disease that an analysis from the health point of view is fully justified.

The film

The plot begins while the credits are being shown. The first shot shows a breathless patient lying on a bed. We then see Dr. Rieux (William Hurt), the main character and narrator in the film, drafting the chronicle of what is about to happen (figure 1). He is attending to a patient, the concierge of the building where he lives.

The action takes place in the last decade of the twentieth century in a city called Oran, with a European look to it but located in South America.



Figure 1. Dr. Rieux writing the chronicle of the epidemic

At the end of the credits, two new characters come into play: Jean Tarrou (Jean-Marc Barr) a French cameraman, and Martine Rambert (Sandrine Bonnaire), a journalist of the same nationality. Both work for the French TV and we see them in their hotel room.

They then appear, weaving their way through a demonstration, on their way to the airport in a car driven by Cottard (Raul Julia), a local who has been looking after them during their time in Oran.

At the airport, Alice (Victoria Tennant), who is the wife of Rieux, is also about to catch a flight out of the city because she needs to undergo some tests that cannot be done in the city (figure 2). However, both the journalists and Alice suddenly discover that their seats have been sold. The doctor's wife finally manages to board the plane, justifying this with her need to be tested. None of them can imagine that this will be the last flight out of Oran for many weeks to come.



Figure 2. Dr. Rieux saying goodbye to his sick wife

Cottard, who is one of Rieux's patients, has introduced the two French people to the doctor, who offers to take them back to their hotel. On the way they chat about their respective work. While doing so, the radio is offering a very curious interview: the journalist is asking a member of the health staff about the appearance of dead rats in the offices of the Department of Public Health building, to which he replies, as he of course would, that there is no reason for alarm.

Doctor Rieux continues to be baffled by his concierge's illness. The concierge suddenly worsens and so the doctor decides to call an ambulance to take him to the hospital. But on the way the sick man dies and later, with the help of a colleague, Dr Castel (Norman Erlich), he carries out an autopsy (figure 3). When they are examining under the microscope some samples taken from the autopsy, they are caught by a judge and by the person responsible for Public Health. The latter recriminates them for having performed the autopsy without authorization. Faced with this situation, they argue that what is more important is that they haven't been told about the appearance of the disease. The health officer tells them that there are just a few cases of typhoid fever, accompanied by adenopathies and vomiting, and that samples have already been sent to the capital for analysis. Dr. Rieux asks him to look down the microscope and when the officer refuses he reproaches him. The judge becomes interested in the conversation and asks what diseases they are talking about. Rieux tells him that the rats and concierges are dying for the same reasons, but the health officer refuses to ratify his diagnosis.

The story follows on with the two journalists. They are at their hotel and suddenly focus their atten-



Figure 3. Performing the autopsy on the first case of plague

tion on the television. The bulletin is informing the public about an emergency meeting between the Governor and the military authorities owing to the health concerns (figure 4). Two doctors appear (on the screen), and to their surprise one of them is the one they met at the airport. The doctors explain that the rats come out to escape from their fleas, which are unable to withstand daylight. But, they say, the problem does not lie in the dead rats but in the millions of fleas looking for new hosts. And the fleas are sick too, since their digestive tracts are blocked by bacilli and hunger is driving them mad. A woman reporter asks whether the unknown bacillus is injected when the fleas bite, to which Dr. Castel replies that the bacillus is not unknown, and that although it changes form it is the same one.



Figure 4. The authorities inform the population

The plague epidemic is made official and a state of emergency is declared in the city. Although full of doubts and quandaries, Dr. Rieux decides, like many others, to leave the city to join his wife (figure 5). On the road out of the city, accompanied by Martine –who will at this time do anything to get out of town- he changes his mind and, to the chagrin of the journalist, decides to remain in the city. His feelings of duty -knowing that he should stay- prevail over his desire to join his wife. This capacity for sacrifice is one of the main traits of the main character.

Rieux devotes all his time to endeavouring tirelessly to control the epidemic. In one house he examines a girl (figure 6) and despite the mother's desperate opposition, decides to call an ambulance to take her to hospital. Nearby, a large group of people are listening to a preacher who is expounding an extravagant message; he says that in both cards and the plague there are rules that determine who will be condemned

and when. He adds that he can prophesy this, taking as a basis mathematics and politics. There will be more people like him who will try to take advantage of collective fear and misfortune. Meanwhile, the ambulance arrives and the girl is taken out amidst the commotion of the public. A workman marks the door of the sick girl's house with a large red "x".



Figure 5. Fleeing the city because of the plague

Dr. Rieux receives a surprise; his mother has arrived. She has come to spend Christmas with him. The blockade prevents people from leaving the city but not from entering. She brings with her the results of Alice's scan. When he sees them, he realizes that his wife is dying.

During these early days of the epidemic, the French cameraman volunteers at the hospital run by Rieux. The doctor, after giving him the appropriate mask (figure 7), makes him see how hard the work is, but Jean persists in his intention. They both go out for



Figure 6. The plague affects everyone, even children

a walk round the neighbourhood, and behind them workmen can be seen fumigating the deck of a boat. They carry on walking and encounter a procession of the faithful who are carrying a saint as a rogation for the epidemic to come to an end. It is made clear that for a frightened population, any hope they can grasp is good. The walk ends when they arrive at a place where the doctor had arranged to meet a friend, whom he introduces to Jean. This friend is Joseph Grand (Robert Duvall), who works in the cemetery section of the Office for the Census and Statistics, a man who has a vocation as an artist and a writer.



Figure 7. Anti-plague masks

Christmas Eve comes and the curfew is lifted to allow its celebration (figure 8). The doctor and the journalists meet for dinner, like many other people, in a large place where a couple are dancing a tango. The doctor chats with the judge and they both comment that that week three hundred people have died, most of them from the plague, but some from shots they received when trying to loot buildings or for other crimes.

Shortly afterwards the scene is a church full of the faithful, who have gone there in their desperation. But they find no consolation in Father Paneloux (Lautaro Murúa), who gives them a retrograde sermon, in which he points to the plague as a divine design, a way of reaching eternity. When it is over, Dr. Rieux criticises him harshly and explains his lack of faith. If he believed in an almighty God, he would stop practising medicine.

The doctor and Jean go to the stadium, the place where those who have to be put into quarantine are taken. They see the deplorable conditions of those interned. Moreover, Rieux knows that there is bad man-

agement; the mother of the girl who was taken to hospital and died of the disease is still in quarantine a month later (figure 9). They talk about this with the health officer and reproach him for the situation. The fact is that the number of families subjected to isolation is increasing geometrically. The doctor reminds him that although it was he who advised isolation, he advised it at home. He leaves highly indignant after managing to get the woman out of quarantine, affirming that it is clear that the situation has been taken advantage of to shut up citizens in the most diverse places.



Figure 8. Fun in adversity

Martine is feeling strange and explores her underarms, neck and groin, suspecting that she may have buboes. She goes to Dr. Rieux, who finds nothing (figure 10), but the young woman takes advantage of the situation to confess the passion she feels for him, which is not at all mutual. The doctor attributes her passion to a vulgar whim, whereas she attributes his rejection to the situation generated by the plague.



Figure 9. Quarantine in the stadium

Father Paneloux offers to run a quarantine unit in a hotel. Dr. Castel, who has developed an anti-plague serum, wants to try it. Grand, the employee of the Office for the Census and Statistics, a friend of Rieux, becomes ill and is taken to the hospital. When Martine hears the news, she goes to look after him and ends up volunteering, despite the doctor's opposition.



Figure 10. Looking for buboes

Felipe (Bruno Chmelik), the judge's son, a boy who was taught to sing by Rieux's wife and mother and who sings in the church, becomes ill. The doctor asks the father for permission to give him the serum developed by Dr. Castel and the father agrees. They give it to him together with a transfusion, but the boy does not get better; he has a fever, breathes with difficulty, is shivering and babbling and after a great shout of pain, he dies, to the desperation of those present, especially Dr. Rieux, who cannot understand this killing of innocents (figure 11). This is the most critical period for the doc-



Figure 11. Another child dies to the despair of Dr. Rieux

tor, since he also receives news of the death of his wife. When they bury the boy in one of the common graves, Father Paneloux lies down beside him and lets the bulldozer bury him alive. At the same time, the journalist tries to leave, but deceived by some of Cottard's cronies, she ends up in the stadium.

Shortly after, the television announces that the epidemic is under control. The news is received with joy by the population. Despite this, the city will remain isolated for another two weeks and the preventive measures will last for another month. But Jean is not so happy, as he thinks that everything will begin again after a time. He meets with Cottard, who considers that nobody has learnt anything from the plague; they will all go on living under the same rules.

The next day Jean wakes up with a fever, thirsty, and with the other symptoms of the plague. Despite this, Rieux treats him at home and gives him the serum. In the next two weeks the epidemic loses strength. Grand ends up recovering. People throng to the stadium and manage to release those being held there. Martine is also freed and is attended by Grand, who takes up his novel once more. Jean recovers miraculously quickly.

Suddenly, shots are heard near the stadium. The perpetrator is Cottard, who says he is the angel of the plague and shoots at anybody within firing range. He thinks that nobody has learned anything from the epidemic. Dr. Rieux and Jean try to calm him from the street and the latter is shot in the chest. Rieux can do nothing and tells the injured man this. They are both embraced by Martine (figure 12), who has seen what happened from Grand's house. When the dying Jean is



Figure 12. Friendship, the main characters together for the last time

taken to the ambulance, he is smiling. Cottard is subdued by the police, who arrest him.

The film ends as it began. Dr. Rieux has just written his memories about the bubonic plague epidemic that he himself experienced in the city of Oran. The last comment is that general happiness will always be threatened; the plague bacillus does not die or ever disappear, it lies dormant ...

The last scene shows a quotation from Camus' work... And a day will come when to the bane and enlightenment of man, the plague will awaken its rats and send them forth to die in a happy city.

The film and its literary source

The film is a free adaptation of *The Plague*, a novel that Albert Camus published in 1947. In films based on literary adaptations, comparing the film with the work that inspired it is always an interesting mental exercise.

It is curious to see how Camus set the action in a city in his native Algeria, then under French rule, specifically Oran, whereas Luis Puenzo, conserving the name of the city, situates it in a South American country. Does he place it in the Argentina of his roots? Is it the Buenos Aires where he was born? Undoubtedly this is the most European of South American cities.

The director changes the time setting in which the action occurs; he wanted to modernise the moment. The epidemic does not occur in the 1940s but in the 1990s. This means that the workings of the bubonic plague do not run smoothly, specifically those referring to its treatment, because since the commercialisation of streptomycin there is an effective treatment for the disease. The film is seen as old; it is not possible that a film released in 1992 and whose action occurs in the last decade of the 20th century should show such an anachronistic setting. What ambulances! What a hospital! And to cap it all the use of an oxygen tent.

If we go beyond space and time references and take as a basis the ideas suggested by reading the novel, the film, although it conserves the general lines of the story, loses the strength and symbolism that Camus reflected in his work.

“...in his novel *The Plague* (1947) Camus is

still interested in the fundamental absurdity of existence, he recognises the courage of human beings in the face of disasters”¹.

“In *The Plague* (1947), a philosophical novel, the experience of the absurd reaches its highest point under the figure of the suffering of the innocent; the plague is a symbol of human life itself and in both one and the other at any moment, a fateful and horrible disease can spring out, like the absurd”².

Other aspects of the novel, however, have been preserved, as is the case of Camus' existentialist pessimism. *The Plague* is an allegory of Nazism and of attitude and helplessness in the face of it. Puenzo could well have chosen this work to adapt to the cinema considering the situation that his country had just come out of. When the people go to set free those held in the stadium, which the authorities have not released although the epidemic has ended, they insult the authorities and shout “freedom, freedom!...”

Some health aspects

Leaving these considerations aside, and taking into account that the justification of the film is the plague and a doctor is the main character, health references are continual throughout the action.

Rieux's wife has to go to the capital for a medical test that cannot be carried out in Oran, a brain scan. In Camus' time, scanners did not exist. The presence of a large number of rats, many of them dead, makes the health authorities suspect that something odd is going on. No great medical acumen is needed to associate the manifest presence of rats with an epidemic of plague.

Drs. Rieux and Castel, after practising the first autopsy in order to learn the aetiology of the disease, speak of lymphatic ganglia and use a microscope to observe the samples. This device and at an autopsy had already been seen on screen, for example in *Panic in the Streets* (1950) by Elia Kazan.

Prudence is essential in health authorities; the alarm should never be raised unnecessarily, but the citizens have a right to be informed. The attitude of the health officer is an example of what should never be done and even less so in relations between professionals. He tries to distort the situation by saying that the cases are only typhoid fever with adenopathies and vomiting.

Rieux and Castel inform the journalists about the ways in which plague is transmitted. The fleas on the rats transfer it from infected rats to healthy ones. When a rat dies, the fleas look for a new host to feed from, which can perfectly well be a human being, and they infect him/her.

The potential mutation of the pathogenic agents is mentioned. Both viruses and bacteria can undergo modifications in their genome and thus manage to trick the immune system. It is commented that the aetiological agent of the disease is a bacillus, although it is not mentioned that this is *Yersinia pestis*.

When it is officially declared that there is an epidemic of bubonic plague, there are many repercussions. One of these is the setting in motion of a series of preventive measures such as sealing off the city to prevent the disease from spreading to other places. Workmen appear fumigating in an attempt to put an end to possible sources of infection. The houses where infected people have lived are marked with a red "x". Those who have been in contact with infected people are gathered in a stadium to be quarantined. Health workers use masks and sometimes gloves for greater safety. This mask could be useful for avoiding contagion from pneumonic plague, which is not mentioned in the film. Common graves are dug to bury the dead quickly and thus prevent the corpses from becoming a source of contagion. Ports are most susceptible to having plague epidemics brought in by boat; this is the environment observed in the film in Oran.

The clinical symptoms of bubonic plague are reflected: brusque onset of fever, headache, shivering, general weakness and the appearance of buboes in the groin, underarm and neck. The French journalist, Martine, examines herself suspecting that she may have buboes; later Rieux does so. It is not surprising that she should have been afraid because previously, in a lift, a rat ran up her leg.

Dr. Castel creates a new serum for fighting the bacillus. It is the only "treatment" mentioned, since the use of antibiotics is not commented at all. The anti-plague serum is also shown in other films, such as the aforementioned *Panic in the Streets* or *Arrowsmith* (1931) by John Ford.

Dr. Rieux shows many of the virtues that a good doctor should have and moreover, he is quite

clear about what his profession involves, "I am a doctor, disease is my natural enemy".

The film, with its good and bad aspects, tries to transmit what the real situation would be like in a city where a plague epidemic has been declared. Leaving aside any symbolism, it is a film in which medicine appears in almost every scene and serves as a basis for the whole plot.

Given the time in which the film was set, Luis Puenzo could have replaced the plague in Camus' novel with any of the new lethal plagues that medicine has faced in the latter years of the twentieth century. And a day will come when to the bane and enlightenment of man, the plague will awaken its rats and send them forth to die in a happy city.

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