Pandemic Diseases in America: Media Influence on Our Fear of the “Other”

_The Strain_ by Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan is a novel that demonstrates the fear humans have when something is unknown to them. While vampires alone are scary, having a mysterious and deadly pathogen spread through a major city such as New York invokes a sense of fear and chaos within readers that is relatable to the helplessness created within the scientific world when a pandemic occurs. Per the Oxford American Dictionary, the word “other” can be defined as “[something or someone] that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about”. This definition will serve as the foundation for my paper as when fear is evoked within citizens, government agencies such as the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) must do their best to curb the panic and media frenzy that inevitably happens when an outbreak such as Ebola happens. My essay will argue that while vampires are scary, a disease is scarier due to the continuous media coverage it garners. I argue this because it is something that we, as readers and citizens of the world, when a pandemic breaks out, we have a sense of dread that this disease will arrive in our nation. _The Strain_ uses this innate characteristic of human nature to illustrate how horrific a vampiric pathogen may be and how the media fuels this horror by othering this phenomenon.
With the novel beginning on the tarmac of John F. Kennedy (JFK) International Airport, *The Strain* uses human instinct to create a sense of nervousness within readers. Those who do not fly frequently have a sense of caution when boarding a plane as the experience of flying is unique and is something that is not done on a regular basis. When we watch the news, and see that something has gone wrong on a flight, a fear and helplessness in evoked within us. We begin to put ourselves into the positions of the passengers on the flight or their families and try to sympathize with the incident and follow the development closely on the news. It becomes an extravaganza that becomes must see TV because of our curiosity into finding out what happened.

An example of this is the “Miracle on the Hudson Landing” that occurred on January 15th, 2009. A US Airways flight carrying 150 passengers and crew landed on the Hudson River in Manhattan after suffering a bird strike failed both engines (Mutzabaugh 2017). What is remarkable here is the fact that the landing and rescue of Flight 1549 was played and repeated on multiple newscasts nationally and internationally. Seven years after the incident, it was also turned into a Hollywood film, “Sully” starring Tom Hanks as the captain of the flight to provide the behind the scenes look at how this miracle took place. The movies demonstrate how our curiosity of the “other” fuels mainstream media. In the novel, this is highlighted as “The Breaking News screen came on [and] this was usually Kelly’s cue to change the channel, but the strangeness of the story drew her in. The TV showed a distant shot of an airplane sitting on the tarmac at JFK” (Del Toro et Hogan 37). Relating this quote back to the definition of “other” provided earlier, it is easy to recognize how the airplane itself is othered because Kelly does not change the channel, rather is glued to see what happens next, similar to how the world was when Flight 1549 landed on the Hudson River or when Malaysia Flight 370 went missing. This
demonstrates that there is something about an aircraft and media that hold our attention when mentioned in the media.

This fear of and curiosity of being different occurs very early on in The Strain, as seen on page 14 where communication between JFK air traffic control and the plane comes to a sudden end, ‘Regis 7-5-3, this is JFK tower, come in, over’. He waited. Nothing, not even a radio click … Somebody said the plane’s gone dark.” (Del Toro et Hogan 14). Through the short sentences and diction, Del Toro and Hogan are able to invoke a sense of fear within readers, one that is of shock and wonder as to what actually happened to a successful flight that landed and made its way onto the runway. While we have heard of airplanes going off the radar, getting into accidents and having mechanical malfunctions, readers are introduced to something that they usually do not see or hear, a plane landing then “going dark” on the runway. As Regis 753 flies into the heart of one of the world’s busiest airports, readers get chills down their backs as they imagine themselves on Regis 753. This is significant because it illustrates how the unknown begins to gain substance in the novel. It demonstrates how the unknown, while still being othered, pulls us into familiarizing something that does not quite add up in our minds, a plane having to do an emergency landing. Through this, Del Toro and Hogan illustrate how airplanes are a hotspot for diseases to spread. Using an airplane to illustrate the transfer of disease is a great way to do so because it is something that occurs very frequently. It has become very feasible to travel from one city to another as airlines fly all over the world. Each year, there are about “1 billion passengers [who] travel by air; [with] 50 million of these [passengers] traveling to the developing world” (Mangili et Gendreau 989). For example, a SARS outbreak on a 3-hour flight from Hong Kong to Beijing on March 15th 2003, carrying 120 passengers led to 22 people contracting the disease”, and this is important to view because “[this flight] did not follow the
typical example of in-flight transmission of airborne pathogens- i.e., risk of disease transmission is associated with a flight time of more than 8 hrs (Mangili et Gendreau 991). The fact that a 3-hour flight was able to spread a contagious disease such as SARS makes it very plausible for Regis 753 to spread a deadly pathogen. This is seen because the flight in the novel travels from “Tegel, in Berlin” to JFK which has a flight time of 9 hours, making it very feasible for the virus to spread through the whole flight (Del Toro et Hogan 20). It is at this moment where Germany, as a nation begins to be othere in the novel. Up until this moment, the CDC did not see a flight from Germany as being a threat for infectious diseases. This sense of shock is seen when Eph says “bring in Germany’s Federal Ministry of Health on this... On the off chance this thing is transmissible, they should be seeing [in Germany] too (Del Toro et Hogan 46). While infectious outbreaks in the world have made their way close to home, fear of traveling to internationally has become very prominent when outbreaks do occur. This is proven by the travel restrictions that are implemented by certain countries when these pandemics do occur.

Our first subtle hint to Germany being involved in this novel is seen through “Lufthansa 1567, missing a collision with [Regis’] landing gear by a mere foot” (Del Toro et Hogan 15). Lufthansa is the national airline for Germany which is interesting because rather than using any other airline, the authors choose to use Lufthansa reinforcing Germany as the othere nation in this novel. This is vital because rather than having the national airline of Germany carry this infectious disease, Del Toro and Hogan have this flight nearly collide with Regis 753 demonstrating how close the othere and catastrophe really is to us as a nation. As I went back through the text, I began to recognize the mediums through which Germany is being othere. An example of this is seen when Eph is notified about the “German diplomat on the flight” (Del Toro et Hogan 44). I argue that this is othereing, because unknown to Eph, he is given special
instruction to check on the diplomat from the TSA. Out of all of the passengers on board, Eph is asked to single out this particular passenger. This brings into play another definition of othering, which is “to become conscious of by viewing as a distinct entity specifically to conceptualize (a group) as excluded and intrinsically different from oneself” (OED). By singling the diplomat out, Eph and the CDC are othering this individual due to his nationality, something that is very relevant in mainstream media today with Donald Trump’s travel ban. Through the evidence so far, it is clear that Germany seems to play a prominent role in this novel. Del Toro and Hogan begin to isolate Germany as the country that brings the virus onto American soil.

The unknown in *The Strain* is very relevant to what happened in reality when the Ebola outbreak made its way across to the United States of America. Similar to how Eph and Nora quarantine the survivors, “the governors of a number of states, including New York and New Jersey imposed [a] 21-day quarantine on health care workers returning to the United States from regions of the world where they may have cared for patients with [the] Ebola virus” (Drazen et al 2029). This quarantine is significant in both the book and in real life because it illustrates the fear these states had over such a virus. It demonstrates that without even confirming or diagnosing these workers, they were quarantined for being in contact with those who may have had the disease. I argue that the fear of not knowing if the Ebola virus got transferred from one patient to another caused the governors to impose this quarantine thus illustrating that without any proof, the quarantine was not necessary. This is proven by the article as it goes on to say that “an asymptomatic health care worker returning from treating patients with Ebola, would not be contagious” (Drazen et al 2029). This fear of a deadly virus is highlighted in the novel when “Eph and Nora st[and] with [Redfern], masked and gloved, eschewing full barrier protection” (Del Toro et Hogan 111). What is interesting about the full barrier protection the two wear is that
it is eerily similar to the Hazmat suits health care workers wore while treating Ebola patients. Using objects such as the masks and gloves further creates a sense of othering between those “infected” and the scientists. This is seen through the diction used in this quote. For example, according to the OED, a “barrier” is defined as “a fence or material obstruction of any kind erected (or serving) to bar the advance of persons or things, or to prevent access to a place”, which is exactly what the gloves and masks do, they stop the infected from contacting their body. Using the foundational definition of other for this essay, the fact that Eph and Nora treat Redfern and the rest of the survivors because of their perceived differences illustrates how othering due to fear of the unknown occurs in The Strain. Both scientists, rather than treating the patients as normal humans, treat them as others, as different from “us”. This is seen when they treat the patients like cadavers, or experiments in order to figure out what is wrong with them and how they will provide answers that will save an outbreak from occurring. By treating their patients as experiements, Eph and Nora implicitly fear their safety because even as scientists, “it was unlike any pathogen [they] had encountered in [all their] years as an epidemiologist with the CDC” (Del Toro et Hogan 47). The unknown becomes very central because it is what differentiates characters amongst themselves as well.

The hierarchal power seems to remain in the novel as it is America vs. everyone else. This is shown by how much the CDC control the novel. What I mean by this is that the novel illustrates how much influence the CDC has over infectious diseases that threaten the nation as a whole. The Centre for Disease Control’s mission statement as stated on their website is that the “CDC works 24/7 to protect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S. Whether diseases start at home or abroad, are chronic or acute, curable or preventable, human error or deliberate attack [the] CDC fights disease and supports communities and citizens
to do the same...[The] CDC increases the health security of our nation” (CDC). This mission statement is othering because the CDC are known to be one of the most influential organizations in preventing disease and believe that they control how the world runs when an outbreak occurs. This element of prevention is seen in *The Strain*, when Eph says “We need to determine the progression of this syndrome, whatever it is, if we want to have any chance at all of arresting it and curing him”, demonstrating how similar to the Ebola outbreak, scientists and the CDC had to first diagnose the disease and had to understand the disease before treating their patients. (Del Toro et Hogan 191). This is important because when we think of diseases invading a country like ours, the first thing many of us do is panic about the pathogen and begin to fear its consequences. This is once again, similar to Donald Trump’s travel ban, in which he believes that citizens from certain nations are high risk citizens that must not be allowed into the United States of America to protect American from invasion. I argue that, like the othering of international citizens, unknown diseases are put on a media pedestal. We make the disease into a spectacle that the media feed into. Every time a pandemic occurs, it is a strange biological determinant that affects our community and because we are not all scientists or do not understand what is happening, we get scared and the media makes it worse than it is through their expert interviews and press conferences.

In *The Strain*, the media plays a major role in creating the chaos that leads to this fear in the first place. As said by Bulck and Custers, “a pandemic of fear, may be spread by a very different and arguably more virulent vector: the news media. This carrier has the potential to expose hundreds of thousands or more to the same frightening messages at the same time” (1). As readers are worried about the deadly pathogen, the othering takes place through the media exposure that occurs throughout the book. A great example of this is when “the news crews were
set up for live remotes from the medical examiner’s office. That attracted a sizeable crowd of onlookers, whose nervousness was palpable from around the corner. Lots of uncertainty” (Del Toro et Hogan 131). From this quote, it is evident that even before citizens get an answer to their questions, there is anxiety amongst citizens, that there is something in the air that is not right, as if something did not belong there. In this paper, I have defined “other” as “[something or someone] that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about” and this is exactly what the news does. The news takes something that is different and turns it into something they use to gain ratings under the pretense of informing the public. What I find interesting is the multiple layers of othering that takes place in this scene because while the media is othering on a broad level, Eph and Nora seem to be othering Setrakian. My argument arises from the fact that he is someone who has experience in handling this “disease”, yet due to the hierarchal authority and education structure is not listened to.

This othering is emphasized in the section called “The Old Professor” as readers recognize the difference between knowledge and doubt in the unknown. This doubt is seen in Eph, our epidemiologist who is called in on the toughest jobs for the CDC. He seems to pride himself in cracking the toughest cases and thus doubts Setrakian and his lay knowledge. He does not recognize that though distinct, Setrakian may have the knowledge to help him crack the case. Unlike Nora, Eph asks himself if it is worth it in “entrust[ing] this precious time to a crazy person”, demonstrating how he begins to differentiate himself from Setrakian (Del Toro et Hogan 212). I argue, that the other, Setrakian, is a threat to Eph because it seems that he has more knowledge about this deadly pathogen than both the CDC officials. While Eph and Nora stick to the scientific script and try to find answers through rationality, Setrakian uses his experience to find answers. This is significant because it demonstrates that being different has its
advantages. It illustrates that while Setrakian may be different in the way he dresses and acts, he is someone who plays a major role in finding a “cure” for the virus that spreads through New York.

It is not until the second half of the book that readers learn that the disease is a vampire. While we are given clues throughout the novel, Setrakian introduces Eph and Nora to “another v-word… vampire”, illustrating how the other once again invokes a hidden fear of this mythical monster within readers (Del Toro et Hogan 215). In the short exchange between Eph and Setrakian on the same page we recognize how vampires are viruses. An article by Katia Yurgis gives us an example of vampires being associated with viruses as she says that “the rise in vampire literature and film when the media was spreading alarming news about the recently discovered AIDS epidemic [could] be regarded as a cultural reflection of the anxieties generated by the fear of AIDS” (4). She goes on to talk specifically about the United States, something my essay specifically focuses on as that is the setting for Del Toro’s and Hogan’s text The Strain. She says “in Western culture, particularly in the United States, the vampire phenomenon can be seen as a reflection of fear generated by the AIDS epidemic, and enhanced by alarming media coverage (Yurguis 4-5). This is a strong example illustrating how vampires have been used to personify viruses and diseases throughout history. By personifying these diseases as vampires, I suggest that it makes it easier for humans to “other” them because humans are already fearful of vampires because there is no concrete evidence or subject to pinpoint as a vampire. A vampire is an intangible creature, made up of our imagination from the days of Bram Stoker’s Dracula. Adding another layer on top of the societal fears of pandemics, both vampires and viruses are othered in The Strain as we do not know how to precisely define either term.
The vampire as a disease is further reiterated through the description given by Setrakian. While the characters in the novel believe that Setrakian does not have the “scientific” knowledge they possess, what is interesting is the fact that he knows more about this disease than either epidemiologist does, that he possesses the scientific knowledge they have. This is seen when Setrakian describes the whole process in which the vampire infects its prey. “‘capillary parasite that reproduces in the infected… that it is the conduit of the virus. ‘The actual vector... the virus has found a way to evolve its own mechanism’” (Del Toro et Hogan 218-219). The reason this is interesting is because the vampire begins to illustrate real life characteristics of a virus. By being able to evolve and infect humans, it begins to adapt into an actual epidemic. This was seen with the Ebola outbreak as the disease spread very rapidly. According to a New England Journal of Medicine article, “during the period from early June to mid-September 2014, the epidemic of Ebola virus disease (EVD) in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone grew exponentially, with national doubling times of between 16 and 30 days. On the basis of case reports through mid-September, and assuming no change in the trajectory of the epidemic, we predicted a cumulative total of 21,000 cases in these three countries by November 2” (Agua-Agum et al 584). This illustrates that it is very possible for the strain in the novel to become an epidemic and this adds to our fear because as said in the beginning of this essay, flying in an airplane and experiencing a pandemic is not something we are not used to seeing frequently. It is something that is out of the norm of everyday life. This notion of experiencing things that we are not used leads to our fear in the other.

At the beginning of this essay, I provided a definition of the other which according to the Oxford American Dictionary can be defined as “[something or someone] that is different or distinct from one already mentioned or known about”. Throughout this essay, I have provided
various examples of how Guillermo Del Toro and Chuck Hogan’s *The Strain* illustrate the role media outlets play in invoking fear within communities when a pandemic occurs since citizens do not know what the disease is. The association created between vampires and a virus is powerful because it leads to tension and anxiety within readers when something they viewed as mythical (vampires) and scientific (viruses) come together to create a pandemic that takes over the world.
Works Cited


