

bankrupting the studio with self-indulgence. And writers, as much as this hurts to admit, can fall in love with their words and may sometimes need a nudge to look at their script with more objectivity.

But the development process can also take the personality out of a film, turning it into formula. And Hollywood has a blockbuster mentality. There's a preference for the big, event movie: As Joe Roth, the current head of Disney films, has said, he'd rather make one \$75 million picture than three \$25 million films.

**T**he urge to go for a home run is partly the result of economics (it costs roughly the same amount to promote and distribute any movie; big names and big stories, which are expensive, have bigger potential audiences here and overseas). Nevertheless, this has led to a bifurcation: Many of the more "serious" films come from independent sources, while the majors swing for the fence. This isn't necessarily a bad thing for the viewer, since there's still plenty of choice. (And thanks to technological advances, the average person—with a VCR—has a wider selection of movies at a cheaper cost than ever before.)

It's true such "serious" films might cut deeper than average Hollywood fare, but there's something to be said for major studio output. Taken as a whole, Hollywood still produces a fairly diverse amount of entertainment across any number of

genres. And perhaps *I'm* the philistine, but many "art" films make me appreciate the zip and even vulgarity that Hollywood is able to provide.

Seventy years ago, screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz sent a famous telegram from Hollywood to then-journalist Ben Hecht: "Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots. Don't let this get around." Well, it got around, and nowadays more writers want to create the perfect three-act screenplay than the Great American Novel. Playwright John Guare has a blurb on the back of *Monster*—the book is a "perfect antidote for anyone delusional enough" to want to write a screenplay. I don't think it'll have that effect. As Dunne notes at the end of the book, through the eight years they worked on the film, he and Joan had a good time. And as maddening and absurd as the system seems, a lot of the excitement—and money—of working in the movies still comes through.

If Hollywood goes through some lean years, it's probably due for a shakeout in middle management, and the line may finally hold on the salaries of talent. But until then, though the system could use some reform, as long as it's not truly broken, and the people on top are making so much money and having so much fun, no one's going to fix it any time soon. ♦

*Steve Kurtz is a screenwriter living and occasionally working in Los Angeles.*

cized outbreak of hemorrhagic fever in Kikwit, Zaire. The real-life outbreak, which science writer Ed Regis chronicles in his fast-paced and absorbing new book, *Virus Ground Zero*, also inspired apocalyptic warnings. Early press reports cited "fears that it may be the deadly Ebola virus, an incurable 'doomsday disease,'" and quoted a Zairian doctor who said, "The situation could get totally out of control." A World Health Organization official told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "If it is Ebola, this is the big one—this is what we're always thinking about when we talk about serious, dangerous disease threats."

The public had been primed to expect "the big one" by books like Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague* and Richard Preston's *The Hot Zone*, both published in 1994. "In a sense, the earth is mounting an immune response against the human species," Preston wrote. "Perhaps the biosphere does not 'like' the idea of five billion humans.... The earth is attempting to rid itself of an infection by the human parasite." Preston called AIDS "the revenge of the rain forest" and warned, "It is only the first act of revenge." *Outbreak*, in which the first person to be infected picks up the disease while helping to build a road through the jungle, flirts with a similar idea. The local witch doctor, explains a physician, "believes that the gods were awakened from their sleep by the men cutting down the trees where no man should be, and the gods got angry. This is their punishment."

**R**egis has little patience with this sort of nonsense. "The 'revenge of the rain forest' doctrine was in fact a return to a prescientific, animistic conception of nature," he writes. "[I]t was a throwback to the days when the gods were portrayed as stomping about in heaven and hurling thunderbolts down from the sky. The only difference was that these days they were slinging viruses." The notion also helped fill a void left by the end of the Cold War: "All at once viruses had replaced the A-bomb as the object of the apocalyptic vision." Noting that "Ebola kills 88 percent of its victims," a participant in an Internet discussion group called it "the mightiest threat mankind has yet faced."

But in the end, Ebola killed less than one-tenth of 1 percent of Kikwit's popu-

## Bug Zappers

By Jacob Sullum

**Virus Ground Zero: Stalking the Killer Viruses with the Centers for Disease Control, by Ed Regis, New York: Pocket Books, 244 pages, \$23.00**

**T**he 1995 movie *Outbreak*, in which a cute monkey carries a nasty virus from Zaire to California, opens with a quote from the geneticist Joshua Lederberg: "The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is the virus." Early in the film we learn that the "Motaba virus" causes a form of hemorrhagic fever that "kills in two or three days," and "the mortality rate is 100 per-

cent." After a small California town hit by the microbe is quarantined, the general played by Donald Sutherland says, "If that bug gets out of there, 260 million Americans will be dead or dying." The general played by Morgan Freeman raises the stakes even higher: "The fate of the nation, perhaps of the world, is in our hands."

As it happened, the movie opened a couple of months before a highly publi-

lation—300 people out of half a million, in a crowded city with poor medical care and abysmal sanitary conditions. And as Regis shows, it was stopped through utterly prosaic methods. A physician with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes the first order of business when he and his colleagues arrived at Kikwit General Hospital, the main locus of transmission for Ebola: “We just went in, cleaned the floor, removed the needles, removed the cadavers, put them in body bags, did the cleaning.” Wearing protective clothing, they cleared out and carefully disposed of the vomit, urine, excrement,

**“The fact of the matter was that Ebola hemorrhagic fever, along with Marburg and Lassa, were diseases of poverty and bad hospitals,” writes Ed Regis. Common items such as rubber gloves, plastic gowns, and face masks could halt an epidemic. A killer virus itself could be killed by a liberal application of household bleach.**

dirty needles, and dead bodies, liberally applying bleach solution to everything. They instituted basic sanitary procedures, including the wearing of gloves and face masks. Thus was the “doomsday disease” conquered.

“The fact of the matter was that Ebola hemorrhagic fever, along with Marburg and Lassa, were diseases of poverty and bad hospitals,” writes Regis. “Although they thrived momentarily when they erupted in such environments, those same viruses were stopped cold every time they turned up in well-equipped medical institutions.... Common and ordinary items such as rubber gloves, plastic gowns, and face masks could halt an epidemic. A killer virus itself could be killed by a liberal application of household bleach. [T]hose items, mundane and boring as they were, had been the very things that had terminated the Ebola outbreak in Kikwit.” He

quotes a South African physician who dealt with an earlier outbreak of the disease: “Ebola is of absolutely no danger to the world at large. It is a dangerous virus, but it’s relatively rare and quite easily contained.... The media is scaring the world out of its wits, and movies like *Outbreak* are doing people a great disservice.”

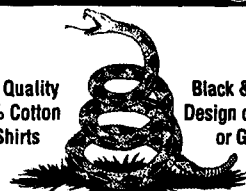
What about “erring on the side of caution”? Dustin Hoffman’s character in *Outbreak*, a virus specialist at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, is portrayed as heroic because he always assumes the worst, and sometimes he’s right. But as Regis’s account of the 1976 swine flu fiasco makes clear, such pessimism has its costs. Based on a single ambiguous case, the Ford administration ordered a crash vaccination program that killed 58 people through side effects before it was aborted. The program saved no one, since the epidemic never materialized: “The swine flu virus had disappeared from the United States before the vaccination campaign began.”

In addition to debunking microbe-of-the-moment alarmism, Regis offers a lively, engaging, and often amusing account of how disease controllers do their job: tracing (and breaking) lines of transmission, identifying pathogens, looking for their source, developing countermeasures. He pops back and forth in time a lot, which is occasionally confusing (and makes the absence of an index all the more irritating) but generally helps to keep things interesting. We learn not only about the Ebola outbreak in Kikwit but also about the eradication of smallpox, the solution to the mystery of Legionnaires’ disease, and other fascinating episodes in epidemiology.

In telling these stories, Regis also tells the story of the CDC, which in many ways has been a victim of its own success. Because Americans no longer live in fear of once common scourges such as malaria, polio, measles, and tuberculosis (to say nothing of smallpox and bubonic plague), occasional outbreaks of infectious diseases get a lot of attention. And because scientists have learned to identify a bewildering variety of previously unrecognized pathogens—hantavirus, *Legionella pneumophila*, the Rocky Mountain spotted fever *Rickettsia*—it sometimes seems as if dangerous

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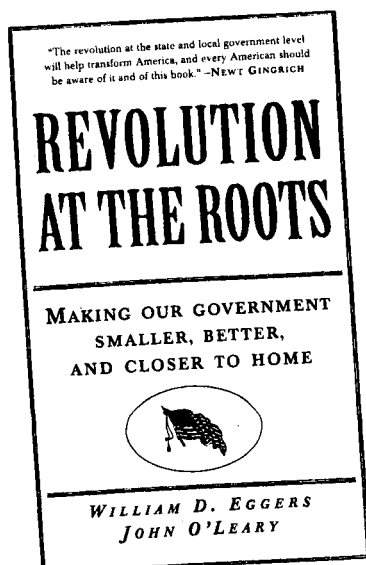
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diseases are cropping up everywhere. "The irony was that the CDC's increasing successes identifying pathogens were looked upon as ominous and threatening, as foreshadowing uncontrolled outbreaks of 'new' and 'emerging' diseases," writes Regis. "The more successful the CDC became, in other words, the more diseased the world looked."

In reality, however, the CDC's new assignments simply did not compare to the plagues of the past. Even AIDS, though incurable, could generally be avoided by eschewing certain activities; contrary to the impression created by the CDC itself, it never threatened to sweep through the general population. Once the infectious disease business seemed to be winding down, it was only natural that the CDC would seek new missions, moving from diseases to injuries, from germs to risky behavior. It became "the ultimate self-amplifying federal bureaucracy. After all, who could object to any institutional excess, any expenditure or innovative new program, so long as it was done in the name of 'health'? And so the place was always building itself up, expanding, and heading off in important new directions."

**B**y the late 1970s, the CDC was taking an interest in smoking, drug addiction, car accidents, unwanted pregnancy, social disorders, emotional stress—even violence. "Whatever else could be said about it," notes Regis, "violence was a product of human free choice, not something that was transmitted to you unknowingly or against your will, like a virus. You did not wake up in the morning and find yourself suddenly in the grip of a violence infection."

But such quibbles did not stand in the way of the CDC's empire building. By 1994, Regis reports, "the CDC's main business, the control of infectious diseases, was just one of dozens of jobs that the CDC had taken on, just another of its many and diffuse assignments. At that point, indeed, the National Center for Infectious Diseases ... was receiving only about 10 percent of the CDC's overall budget." Traditional public health specialists—including Dr. C. J. Peters, head of the CDC's Special Pathogens Branch, who is featured prominently in *Virus Ground Zero*—have expressed discomfort with the agency's ever-

expanding agenda, which they think detracts from its central function. Regis notes that, contrary to expectations, infectious disease mortality in the United States rose between 1980 and 1992, a period when the CDC was spreading itself thin by taking on projects far afield from its original mandate.

*Virus Ground Zero* suggests another problem with the CDC's undisciplined ambitions: The attitude and temperament needed to fight infectious diseases may not be appropriate for other causes of morbidity and mortality. "By and large," Regis says, "physicians gravitated toward public health because they regarded traditional one-on-one medicine as boring, pointless, or both." They liked the fact that "the focus was on 'herd health,' which meant concentrating on groups of people rather than individuals; the objective was prevention, immunization, making whole populations healthy." This collective approach may work fine for tuberculosis or Ebola, but it tends to run roughshod over individual rights when it's applied to voluntarily assumed risks.

Dr. Joanna Buffington, head of the CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service, is one of those physicians who prefers to deal with populations rather than people. As Regis tells it, she joined the CDC because she was sick of her family practice. "She hated it," he writes. "She hated the patients who wouldn't take care of themselves, the smokers who came in with their fourth bout of pneumonia but who wouldn't quit smoking, the plump and portly jumbo types who wouldn't cut down on their eating, wouldn't exercise." She tells Regis, "I started to *resent* these people. And then I'd think, 'Wait a minute, a doctor is not supposed to feel like that. I'm supposed to be compassionate and caring.' But I was getting *angry* at these people!"

It's a good thing that people like Buffington turn their anger against deadly microbes. But I worry about putting them in charge of achieving "a smoke-free society" or halting the "epidemic of obesity." Recalcitrant smokers and portly jumbo types should worry too.

Senior Editor Jacob Sullum (jsullum@aol.com) is the author of a book on the anti-smoking movement, forthcoming from The Free Press.

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# The Cubic Zirconia Court

"Must carry" cable rules don't sparkle.

By Thomas W. Hazlett

**T**wice in the 1980s, federal appeals courts threw out "must carry" rules crafted by the Federal Communications Commission. These regulations forced cable TV systems to give channel space to every local broadcast (over-the-air) television station. The courts found this infringement of the editorial discretion of "electronic publishers" a violation of the First Amendment's directive that "Congress shall make no law...abridging freedom of speech, or of the press."

That's when Congress got involved. Apparently encouraged by the tidy unconstitutionality of the twice-rejected rules, the House and Senate overrode George Bush's veto to enact the 1992 Cable Act, a measure featuring a statutory version of the old FCC rules. Industry wizards widely theorized that the law would again be overturned on constitutional grounds. But in a 5-4 decision, the Supreme Court has upheld new "must carry" rules—and delivered a stunning blow to free speech in these United States.

The premise of the decision is that cable television systems possess monopoly power in the local distribution of video programming. Hence, Congress serves the interests of "free speech" by compromising rights (including the right to select the networks featured on any one cable system) to enhance the speech of others—local broadcasters.

These TV stations, licensed by the FCC, are sprinkled with the fairy dust of "public interest, convenience, and necessity." As defined by Washington, they deliver the information services vital to the health of American Democracy.

In reality, "must carry" works like this: In the vast majority of cases, cable companies are happy to give carriage to all the locally available broadcast signals—it's cheap (essentially free to cable operators), popular programming. But in some mar-

kets (say, the San Francisco Bay Area), adjacent communities have been assigned TV stations (say, Oakland, San Jose, Petaluma, and San Francisco), and "must carry" dictates that multiple ABC or PBS affiliates elbow into the cable menu. These marginal stations are neither popular, as their programs are entirely duplicative, nor inexpensive, as they chew up megahertz which would otherwise transport The Learning Channel or C-SPAN2.

**I**n the March 1996 issue of REASON, C-SPAN CEO Brian Lamb complained bitterly that the 1992 act had effectively eliminated or reduced carriage of his two networks for at least 7 million cable TV subscribers. This effect, said the Court, was but a small price to pay for ensuring the "governmental purpose of the highest order in ensuring public access to a multiplicity of information sources." Earth to Supremes: The high-quality, information-rich cable channels knocked out in millions of U.S. households are making room for low-valued, little-watched broadcast outlets featuring *Mannix* reruns and, most sensationally, home shopping!

Having sold its cable systems, *The New York Times*, a First Amendment-protected newspaper, now endorses "must carry." At least the paper concedes that "one perverse result...is that it knocks out valuable channels like C-SPAN in favor of duplicate home-shopping or minimally watched channels." So we sacrifice the information cornucopia of the best public affairs television in the history of the medium to catch that *Hello Larry* rerun.

It is curious that local newspaper monopolies, exhibiting high profitability and mega-influence in the marketplace of ideas, cannot be similarly constrained—or protected—by government. The *Times* is not subject to common carrier regulations mandating that it run columns or news

stories by a wide range of "public interest" licensees, despite its larger-than-life role as arbiter of everything "that's fit to print."

Interestingly, newspapers went unprotected against the broadcast TV onslaught—a massacre that has driven the evening edition to extinction and continues to forge one-paper (monopoly!) towns all across the land. The trick is that, as the Supreme Court has shielded the old-fashioned print press from regulation, Congress has grown attached to the news sources it can license. Hence, seeing unregulated newspapers perish in favor of broadcasting outlets with FCC leases (and typically minuscule news operations) was a transition that didn't seem to offend the government's heartfelt support for a "multiplicity of information sources."

The Court actually began its analysis on solid ground: Local cable TV distribution is in fact dominated by franchise monopolies, thanks largely to anti-competitive attitudes at city hall and parsimonious radio spectrum allocations (for, among other technologies, "wireless cable") at the FCC. But in spinning a tale of protectionism—some "broadcast stations had...suffered serious reductions in operating revenues as a result of adverse carriage decisions by cable systems"—the Court spit in the face of audience choice.

According to an official study by the Federal Trade Commission that analyzed which TV stations cable operators dropped after "must carry" rules were abolished in the 1980s, the evidence was overwhelming that dropping "must carry" enabled customers to receive more of the programs they demanded.

But what use is pro-consumer evidence against the threat that "expansion in the cable industry was harming broadcasting"? And what good is cable-originated, unregulated C-SPAN competing against cubic zirconia salesmen and sitcom rerun syndicators licensed in the "public interest"? Hello Larry. Goodbye Brian. ♦

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