

A CATHARTIC READING OF SODERBERGH'S *CONTAGION* AND PETERSEN'S *OUTBREAK* AS PANDEMIC FILMS

Adedayo Michael HAASTRUP and

Martina O. OMORODION

Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Faculty of Arts,

Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

Emails: adedayo.haastруп@fuoye.edu.ng and omorodion.martina@gmail.com

Abstract

The outbreak of the novel corona virus pandemic in 2019 in Wuhan, China signified a change in social relations that led to a new normal in the world. Man as a social animal was forced to adopt new strategies to cope in the face of the new enemy; the unseen microbes that had the potential to wipe out human existence if left unchecked. Social distancing, masking up, quarantine, lockdowns became the realities of people and nations of the world. The heightened fear, terror, information overload, rumors and speculations put pressure on the mental health of many around the world. Life became like a scene out of a horror film, with medics dressed in personal protective gear amidst soaring death rates. One of the other ways in which man in his enforced isolation coped and kept in touch with the social world was through film and social media. The early days of the pandemic saw an increased consumption of films, especially films that dwell on disease outbreak as central theme. This paper adopts a qualitative research methodology and is an investigation into human beings' recourse to film in times of uncertainties. Applying the Cathartic theory and the concept of Cinema-therapy to the reading of Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011) and Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995), it is seen that these films offer man an opportunity to confront and reconcile the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic, offering hope in a situation of despair.

Keywords: Corona virus, Pandemic films, Cinema therapy, Catharsis.

Introduction

The emergence of the novel corona virus pandemic in 2019 in Wuhan, China started off without much significance and little did human beings know that it would bring about a drastic change in social relations as it was previously known and lived. The Federal Government of Nigeria declared the first case of the Covid-19 virus on February 27, 2020. By that time, the virus was spreading like wildfire around the world from the city of its initial discovery in Wuhan, China (Wuhan has vehemently denied this claim). Although, patients had started reporting at hospitals in Wuhan with flu like symptoms and breathing difficulties since mid- December 2019, the city of

Wuhan was not placed on a lockdown till January 23, 2020 and by that time, the virus through its most potent carrier (humans) had spread through persons travelling all over the world. By March 2020, the total global number of Covid-19 cases has surpassed 500,000 (WHO Situation Report (67) with 136 countries implementing additional health measures such as lock downs and border closure. The World Health Organization declared the novel corona virus a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that attacks the human respiratory system is zoonotic in nature, that is, animal to human transmission (Mackenzie and David (46). The outbreak was linked to the seafood and livestock market at Wuhan China in December of 2019. The reservoir host is believed to have been an infected bat virus that mutated in the human and became deadly. The global health crises are made worse through the human to human transmission which occurs through direct or indirect contact with an infected person's saliva, respiratory secretion/droplets which are expelled when the person talks, sneezes or coughs. The rapid surge in cases of Covid-19 around the world spread fear and panic. Government Health Agencies and Centres for Disease Control engaged in contact tracing, quarantine of identified suspected cases and the enforcement of lock downs to contain the pandemic. These activities and forced lockdown resulted in stress, fear and a global financial crisis.

One of the coping mechanisms employed by people against the heightened panic and fear in the world was the streaming of films and television series. Although some of these movies were old (considering the years of production and when the actual pandemic occurred), Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* which was produced in 1995 and Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), suddenly received a new found popularity and viewership. Netflix in March 2020 reports that, "Outbreak" was one of its top ten most popular titles and fourth most popular movies globally on its platform. Travis Clark of the *Business Insider* on March 13, 2020 also reports the growing popularity of Wolfgang Petersen "Contagion" on iTunes chart and other piracy streaming platforms. A review on the comment section of YouTube (a video social media and streaming site) of *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995) show renewed interest in the films especially in the year 2020 and 2021.

The reason for the increase in the consumption of pandemic themed films is the central focus of this paper. Film as an old genre of the art has often being relegated to the position of entertainment. However, film serves additional functions which include education, documentation of history and also the ability to be futuristic. This paper aims at discussing the roles films in a pandemic era through an overview of two films of the medical thriller genre- *Outbreak* (1995) and *Contagion* (2011).

The Theory of Catharsis

The word catharsis originates from the Greek word 'katharsis'. It means "purgation", "purification" or "clarification." Aristotle used the word "catharsis" in his definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude through pity and fear affecting the proper 'catharsis' of these emotions." Various theories have emerged to explain Aristotle's conception of the tragic catharsis. These theories interpret catharsis in three ways - purgation, purification and clarification. The purgation theory offers a medical, ethical and psychological perspective:

1. **The Purgation theory** from the medical perspective holds that catharsis offers a purgation process to the soul in a similar fashion of medicine to the body. Catharsis implies relief and the arousing of the emotions of pity and fear is believed to lead to the purgation of similar emotions like pride and anger. The psychological interpretation rejects the medical stand stating that the theatre is not a hospital and holds that the harmonization of pity and fear leads to balance in tragedy thereby bringing relief. The ethical interpretation of the purgation theory posits that tragedy makes human beings realize that divine law operates in the universe shaping everything for the best.
2. **The Purification theory** by theorists such as Gotthold Lessing and Humphrey House posits that catharsis refers to a moral cleansing or 'purification'. Rejecting the medical interpretation of catharsis, they argue that catharsis is a kind of moral conditioning through which the excesses and defects in one's emotions are purified to reach and maintain equilibrium. For these theorists, a tragic depiction on stage purifies the emotions of pity and fear of its morbid content.
3. **The Clarification theory** holds that Aristotle's catharsis is not concerned with the psychology of the audience rather it is a treatise on the technique of writing an ideal tragedy. O. B. Hardings opines that catharsis refers to the tragic pleasure that arouses from tragic events being pitiable and fearful because these emotions can cause pleasure in the spectator.

Other theories of catharsis have also been developed and merged with media theory in modern psychoanalytic discourse. One of such theories is the aggression of catharsis theory that holds that the viewing of tragic events such as: violent movies, games or sports can lead to lesser aggression in the spectator. Major empirical studies in psychology are available on the cathartic and therapeutic role of media violence. These studies have led to the

development of several theories including the aggression catharsis theory and the therapeutic catharsis theory (Gentile 492). The therapeutic catharsis theory on the other hand holds that the expression/purgation of pent up feelings and emotions that deal with traumatic events allows one to achieve a good mental health. Catharsis therapy states that the summoning of painful memories in the consciousness with emotional discharge is a way of recovering from past traumatic events. Modern psychology holds that catharsis can be achieved from psychotherapy, creative arts/imaginative arts (drama), exercises and other activities that trigger an emotional state. For the purpose of this study however, we focus on catharsis achieved through cinema-therapy.

Cinema therapy and Catharsis

Similar to the Uses and Gratification media theory that focuses on individual use of media to satisfy their social and psychological needs; Cinema-therapy harnesses the power of film watching for impactful therapeutic gains. It is a form of expressive therapy through the use of film for improved mental health. It goes beyond the entertainment value of movies to the release of pent-up emotions and more feel-good emotions. Gary Solomon (cited in Mann 1) defines cinema therapy as “the process of using movies made for the big screen or television for therapeutic purposes. It can have a positive effect on most people except these suffering from psychotic disorders”. The movies used for cinema therapy always have a therapeutic context such as addiction, death/dying or abuse and abandonment.

Bright Wolz, a cinema therapist and author of “The Cinema Therapy Workbook: A Self Help Guide to Using Movies for Growth and Healing” notes that cinema therapy can be cathartic and useful for the first stage of psychotherapy. It can help depressed persons open up and come to terms with repressed emotions. In cinema therapy, either the themes or plot or characters have profound effect on the spectator. Added to traditional therapy sessions, the cinema therapy can produce therapeutic catharsis. Cinema-therapy is in use at hospitals, prisons, rehabilitation homes, and for long term nursing homes. The Chicago Institute for the Moving Image founded by Joshua Flanders in 2000 is at the centre of creating movies for cinema-therapy through the process of film making, intentional art and medical humanities. Over the years, more practitioners have emerged and the cinema therapy field is expanding.

Outbreak (1995) and Contagion (2011)

Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* was produced by Punch Production Incorporated and released on March 10, 1995. The film was adapted from the novel *Robin Cook* and Richard Presto’s novel the *Hot Zone*. The film starred

Dustin Hoffman, Morgan Freeman, Cuba Golding Jr. and Rene Russon. The film focused on the Ebola Virus and the Motaba virus outbreak in Zaire (Africa) and a small town in California. *Outbreak* explores the roles military and civilians play in curtailing the outbreak of a contagious disease. The film traces the spread of a viral disease through a white headed capuchin monkey. It explores the interconnections between humans, animals and the ecosystem. Travel by infected persons to other locations is how the virus spread which is equally true of the Covid-19virus. The film equally explores the ability of a virus to mutate and become more dangerous; as well as the use of viral infection as a biological weapon. The people of Cedar Creek where the virus has spread are put on quarantine to stop the spread of the virus to global proportion and the town set on fire to halt the spread. However, army virologist Colonel Sam Daniels is able to come up with a serum to cure the original strain and with the help of Major Salt, they are able to capture the infected monkey, treat it and create an anti-serum for the residents of Cedar Creek.

The high point of *Outbreak* is the fear and panic which public health crisis can cause. It also fuels the belief that viral outbreak can be used as biological weapon of warfare. In the early days of the corona virus outbreaks, there were unfounded fears and conspiracy theories that the infection was a biological weapon intended to diminish global population especially that of Africa. In *Outbreak*, the military conceives Operation Clean Sweep, a plan to bomb and destroy Cedar Creek with its residents in a bid to stop the progression of the virus. The successful capture of the monkey, the subsequent discovery of a healing serum, and the survival of Cedar Creek town offers hopes that all viruses can be conquered and stopped. It also reassures the people of the government's ability to take charge during public health crisis.

The film *Contagion* of the thriller genre was directed by Steven Soderbergh and produced in 2011 by three production companies namely, Participant Media, Imagination and Double Feature Films. The screen play was written by Scott Burns and it featured stars such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Winslet and Matt Damon. *Contagion* was birthed after the director, Soderbergh and the script writer Scott Burns collaborated after working on an initial project. The film is built on the concept of fear, uncertainty and trauma in man's life. The team set out to answer what the world would be like if it is faced by a viral outbreak transmitted through air droplets and fomites. To achieve this, medical specialists such as virologist and epidemiologists were consulted. The movie thus set out to depict a plausible disease outbreak of global proportion. To achieve this, scientific research and historical investigation into past epidemics such as the Black Death, the Spanish Flu and the Ebola Virus were undertaken.

Contagion sets out to recreate a real life situation hence, its realistic depiction and use of medical languages. The film employed standard disease tracking techniques and emergency response in its depiction of a global health crisis. The film basically highlighted major areas of concern in a pandemic such as fomites (touch points) that transmit infections such as doorknobs, elevator buttons, and others. The spread of infection by the touch of face, nose and mouth, the speed of virus mutation, the rate of infection, the panic and fear that comes from the unknown, panic buying, looting, mass burial, the overwhelmed medical sector, over-flowing hospitals, lock downs, quarantine, the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. The film also highlighted the rapid production of vaccine, the promotion of various home remedies touted to cure the MCV-1 virus, shortage of masks and protective wears, food shortages and the role of government agencies in stemming the tide.

Contagion's strength lies in the similarity of the situational crises around the MCV-1 virus and the Covid-19 virus. Both infections affected the respiratory tract and originated from zoonotic source that involved bats and human cross-termination. In *Contagion*, a bat drops an infected piece of banana which is then consumed by a pig. The pig is later slaughtered and being prepared by a chef who, without washing his hands, transmits the virus to Beth (patient zero) who gets infected as the virus mutates. The Covid-19 virus is believed to have emerged from a livestock market in Wuhan, when an infected bat infects a pangolin which is then processed by the woman. The virus then mutates in the human body and rapidly spreads through respiratory drops and fomites. The end of the film shows the interconnectedness between the environment, animal and humans. It is the destruction of the rainforest in China that forces the bats to take refuge in a pig barn which sets off the circle of infection.

The Role of Film in a Pandemic

Film is one art that is useful in managing reactions to a pandemic. In line with what is purported by experts of cinema-therapy, film can help its viewers handle grief, loneliness and learn lessons of life. Film can also help people be better prepared to cope with unfamiliar life situations such as the corona virus outbreak. The pandemic induced lockdown and daily media reports of deaths from the virus caused an increase in man's consciousness of his mortality and the futility of life. Amongst the various coping mechanisms adopted by persons all over the world, the recourse to cinema movies that dwelt with pandemic themes was a unique one. A survey of the comments section of *Contagion* and *Outbreak* YouTube pages showed an upsurge in visitors to the pages from March 2020. The comments from March 2020 received more likes and interactions than older comments. A review of articles

online and news reports also showed several areas of concern as regard pandemic films. For example, a qualitative research by Testoni et al, which analysed people's specific consumption of films during a pandemic, makes the following findings:

From the data analysis, four main areas of thematic prevalence emerged, which reflected the participants' condition during the pandemic that actually led them to watch epidemic-themed movies or TV series: the need to document themselves concerning the theme of epidemics, the need to exorcize contagion anxiety, the desire to find a character with which they could identify, and the casual condition of finding a peculiar movie related to the theme of pandemics and being interested in it because of the striking resemblance with real life. (1)

This is to say that, in the time of high distress and mental stress, film moved beyond its entertainment value to becoming a source of history, information, therapy and a coping mechanism. During the onset of the pandemic, man sought to find an understanding of what life ahead would be. Rather than recourse to history books, the interest in dramatic depiction of the past is borne out of the innate curiosity of man and the reliance on imagination. Dramatic recreation in the time of pestilence and tragedy is not new to man. Man recreates the role play in a bid to understand or avert danger as seen in the ritual origin of drama. The recourse to both films -*Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995) as a reconstruction of man's reality and as an answer to the distressing reality, the role of the films changed from thriller films to an historical document of the reality of life during a pandemic and how man reacts to a public health crisis.

In the time of high distress and mental stress, film moved beyond its entertainment value to becoming a source of history, information, documentary, therapy and a coping mechanism. At the onset of the pandemic, human beings faced increased stress and trauma as they grappled with the fear and threat of sudden death. The flashing images of the sick, overflowing hospitals, over-stretched medical officers and mass burials on news channels contributed to the heightened level of anxiety and mental stress during the lockdown. In such difficult situations, humans by nature take actions to buffer reality and protect themselves either by seeking knowledge of what is to come or by adopting protective mechanism. Some of these actions might appear irrational at first observation. One of such actions was the hoarding of consumables, such as tissue papers and the consumption of horror films and viral outbreak films. According to the proponents of Trauma Management Theory (TMT), the fear of death, logically, should spur one to avoid news of death and dying. That is to say that, the morbid fear of death and dying guide

people to make choices that represses the anxiety that death generates. Better put, when mortality is salient, people engage in activities that reduces the possibility of death. These activities are considered as anxiety buffers. However, contrary to Trauma Management Theory, the recourse to pandemic themed films such as *Contagion* and *Outbreak* depicts a much deeper need by man to find an understanding of his reality from art by watching are-enactment. This is where Aristotle's theory of catharsis and cinema-therapy comes in.

Cinema-therapy harnesses the power of film watching for impactful therapeutic gains which is achieved through the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. As a form of expressive therapy through the use of film, it goes beyond the entertainment value of movies to aid the release of pent-up emotions. As noted earlier, the films used in cinema-therapy often involves the themes of death, dying, recovery and rebirth which are all present in *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995). The two films are able to offer these therapeutic gains by encouraging the summoning of painful memories (fear) in the consciousness with emotional discharge (pity and fear) as a way of recovering from past traumatic events. The audience, as a passive spectator, observes the actions in the film and finds reassurance in the certainty and distancing effect which film offers.

Watching pandemic themed films like *Outbreak* and *Contagion* offered insights into the complex and befuddling problem of man's survival in a pandemic even when it was an imaginary recreation of the scriptwriter. To buttress this point, watching movies like *Outbreak* and *Contagion* offer the viewers an opportunity to live through the imagined last days of the world. These films offered a parallel reality (imagined world), as a disease outbreak threatens to wipe out mankind, and health officials struggled to trace it and keep it in check. The strength and essence of film lay in its ability to reproduce reality in a fascinating and captivating way. In *Contagion* for instance, the incidents and actions of the films were all witnessed during the early days of the pandemic outbreak. From the conspiracy theorists -such as Alan Krumwede, who blogged about curing himself with a homeopathic cure derived from Forsythia leading to the desperate search for Forsythia and massive sales of Krumwede's worthless mixture-to the hoarding of goods, looting of shops, and the frantic search for a vaccine. Both films at the end offer hope as the spread of the virus is checked and controlled.

The films go beyond coping mechanisms to being a rehearsal of the main event (true life situation) and become a kind of emergency preparation for the days ahead. The films also become prediction of actions to come. This is especially true of *Contagion* which was written after intensive research with scientists. Expert virologists and epidemiologists were consulted to create and

depict what could come from a real life pandemic if it were to occur. The result was a movie close to reality as it can ever be in the action of art as an imitation of life. The movies thus serve as a preparation for the fear fuelled days of the pandemic ahead. The more people watched, the more they felt able to grapple with the unknown reality ahead of them and the more hope they had.

Furthermore, an empirical study by Scrivner Coltan et al in 2020, found that fans of horror films exhibited more resilience during the pandemic; while fans of alien-invasion, apocalyptic and zombie films showed greater resilience and preparedness for the pandemic (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). This resilience was attributed to the fact that fictional experiences (such as films) can act as a simulation of actual experiences from which individuals can gather information and model possible future actions. The exposure to pandemic themed films generated effective coping strategies that could end up being beneficial in real world situations. This ability of film to create a safe space for a spectator to experience fear and terror without experiencing harm is one of its strongest points. This point is buttressed by Scrivner et al in a discourse of horror films:

Horror fiction allows people to safely and frequently experience fear, which is typically experienced in the presence of real danger. By eliciting fear in a safe setting, horror fiction presents an opportunity for audiences to hone their emotion regulation skills. Emotion regulation skills have, in turn, been shown to be associated with increased psychological resilience (2).

The role of a film in a pandemic also includes creating a buffer against stressors and delimiting fears. Emotionally charged films enable a cathartic purgation of emotion from the viewer. This purgation of the excess emotions of pity and fear leaves the viewer/spectator a better person and more capable of dealing with life challenges. The placebo effect is that film creates a safety net against psychological distress and pandemic stress which is made worse by enforced isolation, lock down and social distancing. As seen in the cinema therapy process, films with similar themes to the current situation of the pandemic can serve as a therapy and de-stressors. Empirical studies have shown the effect of comedy films on terminal ill patients, limiting the need for regimented medication.

Contagion- the movie was so realistic in its portrayal that it is reported to be a prediction of the coronavirus pandemic. In the film, the virus MEV-1, sends the Centre for Disease control into a race against time to control the spread of the virus. The virus also originates from China, and moves from a bat to a pig and finally to a human. The virus soon spread all over the world

through global travel and is contracted by air droplets. At the end of the movie over 26 million people are dead from the public health crisis.

Pandemic themed films such as *Outbreak* and *Contagion* also helped satisfy the morbid curiosity of people who were experiencing for the first time, a global outbreak of viral disease. The lack of adequate information on the new virus and the spread of rumours and speculations on social media led to a huge mass of misinformation. Although the world had at different times within the last few decades experienced several disease outbreaks like the Ebola virus, SARS virus (bird flu), and Lassa fever, none was as widespread as the corona virus that has affected almost all the nations of the earth. With the global death rate from the virus pegged at 4.3 million (4,323,139) and the total infected cases at 205 million (August 12, 2021 figures from WHO), the corona virus outbreak was like a zombie Apocalypse.

Curious movie fans on social media have reportedly sought advice on the corona virus from the scriptwriter of *Contagion* Scott Burns. In a report by Norris Michelle in the Washington Post, the scriptwriter is quoted to have said that he found it alarming that people would rather ask a screenwriter for advice on the pandemic rather than a doctor. This shows the versatility and believability of the film. More importantly, *Contagion* was written with the medical advice of a group of scientists including Dr Ian Lipkin who specialized in epidemics. The film was created to explore the situations that can happen at the outbreak of pandemic in the world. Efforts were made to capture accurate details as close to real life situation as possible with in-depth scientific research based on actual viral outbreak. *Contagion* became a prophetic film predicting quite accurately the pandemic situation. Mr. Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary of the United Kingdom, in an interview with the LBC Radio (BBC.com), states that the 2011 movie *Contagion* showed the importance of getting adequate doses of the vaccine. This inspired the United Kingdom to set out early its order of priority for the vaccine and get adequate doses as soon as vaccines were regarded safe for public use.

Conclusion

By recourse to the cathartic impact of cinema-therapy, we find that a movie can evolve from its original intent as a source of entertainment to become a source of information, a coping mechanism and a documentation of an imagined alternative. Although *Outbreak* and *Contagion* were created as entertainment films in the genre of medical sci-fi, its use by audience in a time of extreme distress and fear as a coping mechanism, makes the movies go beyond this function to become sources of information, documentary, historical prediction, stress buffers and preparatory lessons for the global health challenge that emerged in the year 2020. In essence, the creativity of the

dramatic artist is functional as well as aesthetically relevant irrespective of the time it is created or the purpose for which it is made. As art comes from the society and is inspired by the society, it will continuously mirror man's actions, foibles, fears and victories.

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