

# EXAMINING THE ROLE OF FILM IN PREDICTING, REFLECTING AND PROFFERING SOLUTIONS IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## **Abstract**

Since its emergence in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic has substantially impacted the film industry. Cinemas and movie theatres across the world were closed, festivals cancelled or postponed, and film releases were moved to future dates or delayed indefinitely. After months of ease of lockdown, its effect is still being felt due to the resurging variants in some parts of the world. However, despite its lethal effects on the financial returns and the slow pace of film production, the Covid-19 pandemic could not tame the power of film to predict, reflect, document, and proffer solutions. In this regard, four movies were selected across different genres from the major film industries around the world. Content analysis was deployed in examining Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), Netflix's *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020), Emeka Jonathan's *Corona Palliative* (2020) and Nanfu Wang's *In The Same Breath* (2021) to ascertain how films predicted, reflected and proffered solutions to the Covid-19 global health crisis. Findings revealed that in the prediction of the Covid-19 pandemic, movies forecasted its origin, mode of transmission and severity; in reflecting, movies went beyond showing the true state of things to investigating the reactions of world leaders, their citizens and how they coped with the scorching effects of the pandemic and in proffering solutions, health workers' health and safety, and adequate funding for scientific research and production of vaccines were emphasised.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Film, Lockdown, Corona virus, Global health crises, Health and safety.

## **Introduction**

The emergence of the novel "severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), also known as Covid-19, from the Wuhan City of Hubei province in China on the 31st December 2019, has beaten both science and religion as the world grappled with its ravaging effects (Rao et al. 1; Omoera and Ogoke 147). As a result of its rapid spread across the globe, all significant industries worldwide were impacted. All spheres of human endeavour experienced a total overhaul due to the devastating impact of the virus. Mngomezulu claims that:

Although the first cases were reported in December 2019 (hence the name Covid-19), it was only in January 2020 that WHO set up the Incident Management Support Team (IMST) across all its three levels of operation, that is, headquarters in Geneva, regional headquarters and country level. This action immediately placed WHO on an emergency footing. In no time, the virus had quickly spread across the globe. Countries such as Italy, America and Spain recorded hundreds of infections and fatalities. Even countries like Comoros and Lesotho, which did not have any cases up to March 2020, started reporting their first cases between late April and early May 2020. This sent a clear message that no country and no one is immune to this deadly virus. (116)

The whole world remained clueless regarding the treatment of the virus until April 2021, when the European Medicines Agency (EMA) reported that the national regulatory authority has authorised 15 vaccines for public use. Nevertheless, by 30th September 2021, the figures on the world health organization (WHO) Covid-19 dashboard still indicated 233,136,147 corona virus confirmed cases and 4,771,408 confirmed deaths worldwide. As a remedy, the WHO recommended simple precautionary measures such as social distancing, wearing of face mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowd, washing hands regularly, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Government measures had become stratified as some authorities observed.

Ashraf categorised the government measures to control the outbreak into three broad categories: The first included the measures to ensure social distancing, including the closure of parks, schools, public transportation, encouraging work from home or minimal working staff, and the restrictions for dining in restaurants. In the second, public awareness and containment measures, in which general awareness was given to the public, were regularly followed by abundantly testing for Covid-19 positive individuals and quarantining them accordingly. The third referred to the government institutions' financial support programmes, which included cash transfers to households and needy families, relaxation in the loan and debt payments, and relaxing the utility expenses as well (25). As the world grappled with the pandemic, scientists, medical practitioners, politicians, and religious leaders strove to find lasting solutions, just as journalists tried to keep the world abreast of all the happenings around the globe. However, the virus continued to spring up stunts. The WHO kept tracking the emergence of new variants such as The 501Y.V2 variant, first identified in South Africa, Delta plus variant and "double mutant" first found in India, and B.1.1.7 variant from the UK,

with three different resurgences, which were referred to as the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd waves.

### **The Impact of the Covid-19 on Film Industries and the Power of Film**

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly impacted the film industry in 2020 and 2021. According to Gu et al., unlike any other industry, the entertainment industry has reportedly been more vulnerable and at a higher risk factor during this pandemic (1). Jiachong et al. attributed this to a multitude of reasons, which include: the closure of cinema houses, which are the entering doors of the revenue collection of the released films, stoppage of the production of films, which are expected to be on the floor and the sets, and even the release of the films that are ready to be displayed, as the operations are suspended because of the government initiatives of social distancing (2).

This development significantly affected the global box office that nose-dived by billions of dollars. Film streaming via the internet, on the other hand, witnessed a significant increase. According to Sacks, many blockbusters initially scheduled to be released since mid-March 2020 have been postponed or cancelled worldwide, with film productions also halted. This, in turn, has created openings for independent cinema productions to receive wider exposure. The Chinese film industry, for instance, had lost US\$2 billion by March 2020, having closed all its cinemas during the Lunar New Year period that sustains the industry across Asia (Clark 1). North America saw its lowest box office weekend since 1998, between March 13–15 (D'Alessandro, deadline.com). *The Eight Hundred*, the highest-grossing film of 2020, earned \$468 million worldwide (Scott, forbes.com).

According to Tartaglione, “it was the first time since 2007 that the top-grossing film of a given year had earned less than \$1 billion and the first time a non-American film was the top-grossing film of the year” (deadline.com). Despite the devastating impact of Covid-19 on every sphere of life, it could not tame the powerful medium of film that equally mutates and evolve ways of entrenching itself in any society. Therefore, this article examined Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011), Netflix’s *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020), Emeka Jonathan’s *Corona Palliative* (2020) and Nanfu Wang’s *In The Same Breath* (2021) to establish film’s power to predict, reflect and proffer solutions to global health crises.

Scholars and practitioners alike have observed the workings of this medium (film) and have come up with postulations and positions that attempt to define, describe and explain the 19th-century product of scientific endeavour, which has evolved into a medium of mass communication and entertainment. According to Gunning, “The use of images as a source of communication has pre-historic roots” (30). Camargo concurred with this

position by stating that the relationship between images and its means of transmission, refer back to pre-historic periods and goes further to add that the communication was disseminated by means of paintings made in rocks (11). Vidal et al. further asserted that such paintings can be interpreted as figures evocative of distinct elements of that time, as well as the cinema can be seen as an expression of culture and of human existence in a given period (16). Interpretation becomes a vital part of the movie experience. The filmmaker encodes messages to the viewer, who will subject the visual images to their personal interpretations based on their personal experiences and the knowledge of the phenomena being presented. For effective interpretation to take place, there must be comprehension. This is what Jakobson means when he posited that “the understanding of the meanings present in scenes from a movie depends on the conversion of objects into signs” (155). Oliveira et al. further explained that the objects transformed into signs correspond to specific material of cinema, which brings with them a wide range of phenomena of language that transmit the spectator a relationship among the sequences of images and the representation of reality (62). Filmmakers make movies for various reasons. Gunning asserted that: the films are nothing more than moving images, loading messages that have special purposes, whether in the form of entertainment (such as the cinema), with commercial purposes (such as advertisements of consumer goods), Institutional (such as presentation videos used at events or informative (such as social awareness videos) (qtd. in Gabriel et al. 61).

Furthermore, according to Pawar, “...film making is an advanced and important milestone in the development/progress of human beings. Film is the only area, which depicts the people, though they are of any class (poor, middle and rich) along with the predicament and happiness” (150). This again endears the medium to the heart of the spectators or audience as they stand to benefit a lot from both the intended and unintended messages that the film maker passes across to them. Carmona stated that: first, a film narrative provides the spectator with an experience. It could be an intellectual, emotional, spiritual or other type of experience. Nevertheless, viewing film narrative is always going to be an experience. We may experience a classical love story like Titanic (Cameron,1997) or we could experience the traumatic and confusing feeling of amnesia like in Memento (Nolan, 2000). Regardless of the story or discourse, film narrative always remains an experience through which we communicate and learn. (10)

Another strength of the movie is its ability to go beyond depicting familiar characters to the audience but connecting them to those characters to become one with them, empathizing and being moved to act in a certain manner. In his work, “Photoplay: A Psychological Study”, a publication that

marked the beginning of the psychology of the film, Münsterberg posited that “the film creates an imagined world that deviates from real-world scenes as we perceive these in real life. (41). Liberated from real-life perceptual constraints involves the spectator’s self in ‘shaping reality by the demands of our soul’ Carmona maintains that the film’s suggestion of “being liberated from real-life constraints” requires personal efforts from within our souls (41).

The audience or the viewers are at the heart of filmmaking. The audience derives pleasure in interpreting the film’s narrative, which serves as a basis for comprehension and discussion. That is why Carmona reminded us that: we should not forget that films are made so that others can watch them. Making cinema automatically implies that someone needs to view the narrative. The main objective of filmmaking is to construct a narrative so that an audience may appreciate it. This is why spectators play such a fundamental role in this communication process by undertaking narrative comprehension (10).

Also, when discussing the relevance of interpretation in a movie Gibbs and Pye assert that the “central advantage of rooting interpretation in the detail of the film...is that it provides a material and verifiable basis for discussion. Appealing to what is observably present in the film provides a platform of shareable experience, with ready reference back to the film” (4). Film also gives visual representation to abstract thoughts (Moskovich and Sharf 53). Allen equally explains that examining films can promote social thinking and awareness of social perspectives (61). Movies make more impact than the other art forms such as novels, plays, poetry etc. Keles attributed this to technological opportunities. He posited that:

Nowadays thanks to technological opportunities, films reach the large masses faster than books and thus they can be more efficient. Adaptation films make more tremendous impact than literary works. For instance, after “Death in Venice” of Thomas Mann was turned into a screenplay by Luchino Visconti, it aroused considerable interest. And also “Perfume” of Patrick Suskind was adapted by Tom Tykwer and interest in literary works has increased relatively after this film. (653)

But how does film compare side by side with music, theatre and other visual arts? Tom Sherak, President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (best known for their Academy Awards, a.k.a. “Oscars” said in an interview with Vikas Shah Mbe:

Movies inspire, they have a way of setting tones. All elements of art are interconnected; they are very similar. It used to be that you go to a museum and you see an art exhibit and it was someone who was well

known- you had lines to see the exhibit. If someone wasn't well known, it would start small and grow. Movies are like that- but the difference is that movies can both take the lead in creating other arts, and following arts (by which I mean they are able to take a piece of art, and tell the story behind it). When you paint a picture, you just paint that picture! A movie can take that picture to a whole other place... with a story. I think that capability is what separates film, to a degree- from the other arts. (qtd. in Mbe 2)

Fiorelli equally alluded to this reality by stating that: inematic realists propose that films can get at – or show – reality in a way that other art forms can't. The strongest versions of cinematic realism prioritise physical reality by making the bold claim that by virtue of the mechanical, photographic process of their creation, films put us in perceptual contact with things in the world (1). The relevance of movies to both the society and the viewers cannot be overemphasised. According to Sherak: film is a reflection of society, both present and past. The film and its innovations sometimes have to catch up to society but sometimes it leads society too. Movies are stories; movies are people who come out with ideas about something they want to say, something they want to tell someone. Movies are form of communication and those stories, come from the societies- not just where society is presently and what it's doing now- but where society has been. Movies are different things to different people, that's what is so incredible about them (2).

Movies indeed are products of the society; the ideas are generated from the society. The film makers reflect the happenings in the society and also refract back to the society by making comments that would direct the society to a certain direction, thereby impacting and leaving indelible memories on the viewers. Sherak succinctly put it thus: "movies are – magical, fantastical, they take us to places where we have never been to, they make us feel emotions which we haven't felt, and they show us grandeur opulence and beauty that isn't possible in any other medium" (3). Moreso, as a collaborative art form that depends on crews of professionals working together to actualise the film production process, movies equally have economic value, providing job opportunities for the cast and crew of film projects. Moreover, the cinema is unique in that it is a highly accessible social art form, the participation in which generally cuts across economic lines (Uhrig 5).

Another powerful role that the movie plays is bringing about social change by promoting a positive value system, distinguishing right from wrong and pointing at virtues as against vice. Sherak stated that movies can educate too. They tell us things we could never have known. They tell us things we might not know and give us a way to explore the past, the present and the

future (Sherak 2). Movies also have therapeutic value beyond the economic and social values of films. In his article "Cinema is good for you: the effects of cinema attendance on self-reported anxiety or depression and 'happiness'" Uhrig explains that film's narrative and representational aspects make it a wholly unique form of art. Adding that the collective experience of film as art renders it a wholly distinct leisure activity. He analysed the effects of cinema attendance on psychological well-being and happiness. He argued that the visual stimulation of film provokes a therapeutic emotive response and that the collective and controlled experience of this emotive response promotes well-being... In short, the cinema is good for you (4). Sherak opined that movies are about escapism. To him, movies are about sitting in a theatre, watching something- watching a story unfold with people he doesn't know- watching that happen and emoting an emotion knowing that for those two hours when he walks into that theatre, he doesn't have to worry about what is going on outside. He loses himself in what he is watching. Uhrig also asserted that:

The unique properties of attending the cinema can have decisively positive effects on mental health. Cinema attendance can have independent and robust effects on mental wellbeing because visual stimulation can queue a range of emotions and the collective experience of these emotions through the cinema provides a safe environment in which to experience roles and emotions, we might not otherwise be free to experience. The collective nature of the narrative and visual stimulation makes the experience enjoyable and controlled, thereby offering benefits beyond mere visual stimulation. (5)

Attending cinema is another experience that has proven to not only provide therapy for movie enthusiasts but also prolong life. In a groundbreaking research, Konlaan et al. discovered that cinema attendees have particularly low mortality risks -those who never attended the cinema had mortality rates nearly four times higher than those who visit the cinema at least occasionally (Konlaan et al. 75). Films have succeeded in creeping into not only the fabric of every society but also into the human soul. There is no doubt that film has addressed nearly every human endeavour. Perhaps, this explains why the film medium continues to thrive despite the pandemic as evidence shows that they have predicted, reflected and proffered solutions to the pandemic. Movies as a product of society naturally reflect society and proffer solutions to the issues addressed therein through their resolutions. However, film's ability to project into the future and predict events that are yet to happen continues to earn the craft accolades and at the same time leaves many perplexed about its ability to wield such prophetic powers.

## Methodology

Content analysis was deployed in examining Steven Soderbergh's *Contagion* (2011), Netflix's *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020), Emeka Jonathan's *Corona Palliative* (2021), and Nanfu Wang's *In The Same Breath* (2021) to ascertain how films predicted, reflected and proffered solutions to the Covid-19 global health crisis. Nanfu Wang's *In The Same Breath* (2021) and Emeka Jonathan's *Corona Palliative* (2021) are chosen based on their production locations as they informed the filmmaker's perception and projection of the Covid-19 virus which in turn influence their approaches. For instance, Nanfu Wang, an Asian-American who hails from Wuhan, China, where the virus originated, directed *In The Same Breath* (2021), which gives us a first-hand account of how China and US handled the virus. Emeka Jonathan's *Corona Palliative* (2021) is chosen because it captures the response of Nigerians and to a large extent the Africans in general as they grapple with the effects of pandemic. *Contagion* (2011) and Netflix's *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020) were both produced before the Covid-19 outbreak, but both predicted its emergence and spread and proffered solutions.

## Synopses

*Contagion* (2011), an American thriller film directed by Steven Soderbergh. It focuses on the spread of a transmittable virus through respiratory droplets and fomites, the efforts put by medical researchers and public health officials to identify and contain the disease, the pandemonium that ensues as a result of the pandemic, and the successful discovery of a vaccine to halt its spread.

*Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020) is a documentary miniseries of six episodes about pandemics, released on Netflix on 22nd January 2020. The series was co-directed by Isabel Castro, Danni Mynard, Arianna LaPenne, Doug Shultz, and Ryan McGarry. It addresses issues like the possibility of an influenza pandemic, research into achieving a universal vaccine, emerging viruses, anti-vaxxers, and the Ebola outbreak in Africa. Episode one introduces life on the front lines with doctors in the United States and Asia battling a flu and researchers racing to develop a universal vaccine. Episode two captures vaccine debates raging while healthcare workers inoculate against the Ebola virus in Congo and influenza in detainee camps at the US-Mexico border. Episode three shows scientists testing animals and their handlers across the globe for emerging viruses. It also captures doctors working long hours caring for flu patients in the United States and India. Episode four shows the escalation of anti-vaccine debates with medical staff being attacked in Congo. In the United States funding cuts hit hard while researchers in Guatemala make progress. In episode five, family, community,



and faith help physicians and medical advocates stay strong in the face of long hours and relentless disease. And finally, episode six shows viral outbreaks continue to claim lives across the globe as a larger pandemic looms.

#### *In the Same Breath* (2021)

*In the Same Breath* is a feature documentary film directed and produced by Nanfu Wang. It narrates the experiences of people in the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic and how China and the United States of America handled the early spread of the virus in Wuhan to its rapid spread across the United States. The documentary shows the confusion and parallel campaigns by authorities to try to contain the virus and shape the public narrative through misinformation during the early stage of the pandemic, which culminated in an overwhelming impact on the innocent citizens of both China and the United States of America.

#### *Corona Palliative* (2020)

*Corona Palliative* (2020) is a 2020 Nollywood Comedy about the Covid-19 Pandemic, directed by Emeka Jonathan, and starring Chiwetel Agu. It reflects how the Covid-19 lockdown here in Nigeria disrupted Nigerians' normal everyday life and forced them to adjust to the “new normal.” The central conflict ensues as people attempt to defy the lockdown and the Covid-19 protocols set by the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) to prevent the spread of the virus in various ways. The story revolves around a family of six, each family member taking up a character that reflects how Nigerians grappled with the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown.

### **Analyses**

The content of the case studies is analysed, giving particular attention to how the movie predicted, reflected or proffered solutions to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The Projecting Power of Films**

The case studies that predicted the Covid-19 in this study are *Contagion* (2011), a feature film directed by Steven Soderbergh, and *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020), a documentary miniseries of six episodes co-directed by Isabel Castro, Danni Mynard, Arianna LaPenne, Doug Shultz, and Ryan McGarry.

*Contagion* has demonstrated the power of films to predict future events with high level of accuracy. It got so many things right about the novel corona virus (Covid-19), from the origin, China, to the mode of transmission, from bats to humans. The film also predicted how the virus escaped from a live-

animal market to the global community and how the world grappled with the effects of a novel virus that spreads like wildfire.

Jason Bailey cited what Scott Burns, the screenwriter of *Contagion* (2011) wrote in an email to National Public Radio (NPR) based in Washington, United States of America from his article “The Ending of Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion*, Revisited”. Burns posited that the filmmakers wanted to tell the story of a “plausible outbreak”- not a Hollywood exaggeration, “that is why the poster of the movie says nothing spreads like fear” (qtd. in Kritz 1). While Soderbergh, the director of *Contagion* in 2011 added that “The power of movies to predict events with some high degree of accuracy manifests itself in contagion” (qtd. in Asay 352)

We will be discussing how *Contagion* predicted Covid-19 in terms of the origin, means of contact and spread and Conspiracy Theories.

**Origin:** Although in *Contagion*, Soderbergh decided to keep the origin of the virus a mystery, obviously to keep his audience in suspense by revealing the origin of the virus at the last two minutes of the movie, it speaks volumes because of the striking semblance to the origin of the virus. In the last two minutes of *Contagion*, a bulldozer from Emhoff’s company is seen razing down trees in China with bats flying off the trees. A bat is then seen perching in a pig pen and drops an infected piece of banana that a pig then consumes. The pig is slaughtered and prepared by a chef in a Macau casino, who, without washing his hands, transmits the virus to Beth through a handshake.

Even though there’s currently a growing argument especially from the members of US Republican Party that the virus was a product of Gain of Function Research carried out at the Wuhang lab and sponsored in part by the United States CDC, and eventually leaked, as stated by Jessica McDonald in her article “Republicans Spin NIH Letter About Coronavirus Gain-of-Function Research”, Aaron Kandola affirmed in his article “Coronavirus cause: Origin and how it spreads” that the official information on the origin of the virus remains from animals which was later transmitted to humans, through bats and pangolin and spreads through the animal market. This position makes *Contagion*’s prediction apt. Experts have equally agreed with Soderbergh’s portrayal of the virus’s origin, which shows that his predictions are based on scientific findings. In a fact-checking attempt on *Contagion* by Fran Kritz of NPR news, Rebecca Katz, director of the Centre for Global Health Science and Security at Georgetown University, says that:

I show the last few minutes of *Contagion* to my class, to show the interconnectedness between animals, the environment and humans...If you cut down trees, it changes the behaviour of bats. The bats interact with swine, being raised for consumption, and humans then interact

with infected swine as part of food preparations. This is just one example of how an emerging infectious disease can jump species into humans. (qtd. in Kritiz 2)

**Means of contraction and spread:** *Contagion* (2011) has revealed that the mode of transmission of the MEV-1 to be almost the same as Covid-19. Through Dr. Erin Mears' lines when she and her team try to explain how an ailment could spread so fast to the government officials:

At this point, I think we have to believe this is respiratory. May be fomites too... fomite refers to transmission from surfaces...an average person touches their face 2-or 3000 times a day...Three to five times every waking minute. In between, we're touching doorknobs, water fountains, elevator buttons and each other. Those things become fomites (Dr. Erin Mears in Wang's *Contagion* (2011)).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), possible modes of transmission of SARS-CoV-2, include: contact, droplet, airborne, fomite, faecal-oral, bloodborne, mother-to-child, and animal-to-human transmission. Respiratory secretions or droplets expelled by infected individuals can contaminate surfaces and objects, creating fomites (contaminated surfaces). Viable SARS-CoV-2 virus and/or RNA detected by RT-PCR can be found on those surfaces for periods ranging from hours to days, depending on the ambient environment (including temperature and humidity) and the type of surface, in particular at high concentration in health care facilities where Covid-19 patients were being treated (who.int/news-room). This is another plus for the movie.

**Conspiracy Theories:** *Contagion* (2011) equally introduces the conspiracy-theory conundrum. Through the character of Alan Krumwiede (Jude Law) a conspiracy-theorist blogger, we've seen how certain individuals in the society take advantage of health crisis to either score some political point or for financial gains as in the case of Alan Krumwiede, whose first line in the movie "Print media is dying" portrays him as an unconventional journalist who is ready to use his megaphone and his blog to advertise and sell a snake-oil "cure" for his personal financial gain.

According to Douglas et al., disinformation and conspiracy theories "are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (4). While Benkler et al. described it as "manipulating and misleading people intentionally to achieve political ends" (24).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic also brought up a lot of conspiracy theories, especially about the origin of the virus. David et al stated that:

While the SARS-CoV-2 virus—responsible for causing the COVID-19 disease—spreads aggressively and rapidly across the globe, many societies have also witnessed the spread of other seemingly viral phenomena such as fake news, conspiracy theories, and general mass suspicions about what is really going on. (4)

Some of the widely spread narratives are the ones claiming that the virus is caused by 5G cellular technology (Vincent, 2); Bill Gates is using the virus to enslave humanity by enforcing a global vaccination and surveillance program (Shahsavari et al). Other views tagged as conspiracy theories as compiled by Alliance for Science include the following: the perception that the US military imported Covid-19 into China, Covid-19 doesn't exist, COVID is a plot by Big Pharma, COVID death rates are inflated, the virus escaped from a Chinese lab and was intentionally created by Chinese scientists as a biowarfare weapon. On this, Pew Research shows that “nearly three-in-10 Americans believe that Covid-19 was made in a lab,” either intentionally or accidentally (the former is more popular: 23 percent believe it was developed intentionally, with only 6 percent believing it was an accident).

*Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020): the documentary series predicted the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and proffered solution on how a pandemic could be prevented. In terms of prediction, *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* (2020) was filmed around the 2018-2019 flu season and was released on Netflix 22nd January, 2020. It features prominent medical experts in medicine and infectious diseases who projected the possibility of a pandemic in the nearest future. Through Dr. Dennis Carroll, the director of USAID's Emerging Threats Unit's warning in the documentary, we get to know that there's an impending flu pandemic looming. He said, “When we talk about another flu pandemic happening, it's not a matter of if, but when.” Also, the person in charge of preparing New York City's municipal hospitals against infectious disease outbreaks, Dr Syra Mudad voices out his concern in the mini docu-series. He says, “What worries me is that it just takes one person to start an outbreak. We're basically human incubators. We can host a number of different diseases. It's just a matter of time before another pandemic starts, we don't know where or when but we know that it will.” She further noted that the pandemic could then spread throughout the country within a month and then the world the following month. We see that happening with the speed with which the Covid-19 spread.

Another striking prediction that *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* got right is the origin of the next pandemic, which Dr Dennis Carroll predicted will likely come from an animal. In his words: “A pandemic influenza will likely come from an animal, and it will be a new and novel never seen before the virus.” After saying that, we then see the footage of bats, birds, chickens, and pigs. All available evidence for Covid-19 suggests that SARS-CoV-2 has a zoonotic source. Many researchers have been able to look at the genomic features of SARS-CoV-2 and have found that evidence does not support that SARS-CoV-2 is a laboratory construct (who.int). Many health experts believe that the new strain of coronavirus likely originated in bats or pangolins.

*Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* also predicted the possible death toll from the “likely” pandemic through one of the medical researchers, when speaking about a lack of funding for flu vaccines, noted that:

It’s scary because in 1919, it [Spanish flu virus] killed over 50 million people but we didn’t even have planes and we didn’t have people travelling from Asia to North America on a daily basis...we didn’t have factory farms with thousands of pigs and thousands of chickens, but now we do, so it could be that hundreds of millions of people would die from the next pandemic if it were as contagious as the H1N1 in 1919. (*Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak*)

Although data from Johns Hopkins University released late Wednesday, July 8, 2021, showed that the death toll from Covid-19 worldwide was over 4 million (Talmazan 1), compared to the figure projected by the researcher, it is clear that the rapid response by governments of the world and the fast pace of vaccines productions contributed a lot in cutting down the number of fatalities.

The series also projected the likelihood of hoarding of vaccines, Fear factors and self-medication. Dr Syra speaks of “hoarding”, but on a medical level, with vaccinations previously not made available in NYC during a breakout of H1 N1. We have seen this manifesting during Covid-19 when developed countries hoarded the vaccine for their citizens. On the fear factor, Dr Mudad said, “People’s fear factor kicks in before logic. If they think I’ve had any remote contact with a disease, it’s like, ‘Don’t touch me. Don’t come near me!’” this plays out in various countries where people refuse to associate with others especially if they know that such people work in the hospital or have been to places with high Covid-19 cases. On self-medication, the series shows Caylan Wagar, a mother of five who chooses to home-school her young children. Wagar said: “Our lifestyle and the way that I raise my kids is just to be continually evolving and awakening in consciousness and awareness.... I

believe a healthy child has the ability to build up immunity naturally.” In episode two, titled “We Don’t Need Any Man-Made Disasters”, Wagar represents many non-vaccinating families who choose not to vaccinate their children, a development the World Health Organisation considers as the biggest “threat” to society. Till date, many people are still kicking against the Covid-19 vaccine mandate that different governments were imposing on citizens, with protests erupting in major cities across Europe and the Americas with parents and students insisting that there’s no need for the vaccine because the children have an immune system.

### **Reflective Movies**

The movies that reflected the Covid-19 pandemic in this paper include *Corona Palliative* (2020) directed by Emeka Jonathan and *In The Same Breath* (2021), a feature documentary film directed and produced by Nanfu Wang. Although in *Corona Palliative* (2020), the story revolves around a family portraying different aspects of the struggle to cope with the new normal, it equally adopted the multi-narrative “hyperlink cinema” style, just like Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011), which follow several interacting plot lines; discussing various themes such as Religiosity, Fear and Home remedies for Covid-19 saga, prostitution, crime and criminality and new ways of exchanging pleasantries.

**Religiosity:** In Nigeria, religion is central in living patterns and attitudes. Many look up to religious leaders for guidance as the Covid-19 crisis lasted. Guidelines were provided by the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) to prevent the spread of the virus across worship centres in the Nation. Religious bodies, however, have not fully adhered to these guidelines (Okwuosa 398). This was reflected in the attitude of both the clergies and their followers during the lockdown. *Corona Palliative* (2020) clearly reflected that. Pastor Lazarus is stopped at a checkpoint by security operatives on his way to church because he is not wearing a nose mask, and he says to the law enforcement officials: “we are soldiers of Christ; we don’t need all these things”. The security operatives arrested him. Many Nigerian clergies were arrested and detained for defying the Covid-19 protocol. For example, two Pastors and three Imams were convicted for holding services in their religious establishments despite the lockdown order in Abuja (channelstv.com). In *Corona Palliative* (2020), Chidubem equally said: “Our God is a great God, He will not allow anything to happen to His children”, when confronted by her father, who stopped her from going to church as result of the lockdown. Many Christians and Muslims defied Nigeria's lockdown order because they were convinced that God will protect them.

**Fear and Home remedies for Covid-19 Saga:** Fear has been a major factor worldwide during the Covid-19 lockdown, pushing people to do all manner of things to stay alive. There were videos on the internet on home remedies that people believed could cure the virus, especially because there was no known cure for the virus; people were always running away from travellers, especially those who visited affected areas and many believers who put faith aside and scamper for safety when confronted by symptoms of Covid-19. These themes are visible in *Corona Palliative* (2020). We see Pastor Lazarus, Chidubem and their church members fleeing when a church member manifests the symptoms of Covid-19 during deliverance service. Chidubem stays at home, drinking hot water, lemon, and ginger tea. After receiving a text message that the person exhibiting Covid-19 symptoms tested negative, she says to her sister Chinwe in pidgin, "I swear fear na bastard. In fact, na fear dey kill person sef before the virus." We've also seen Mama Chinwe zealously following the Covid-19 protocol, including literally robbing hand sanitiser all over her body and forcing her grownup children to wear nose masks and drink home remedies for Covid-19. Her mantra has been "na for coronavirus; anything for coro I go do am." Papa Nduka yells out, "Korona palliative abanagwarantino" (the line he repeats throughout the movie when confronted by fear or wonder). He refuses to eat his food because his daughter Nancy sneezes when serving him. At the restaurant, a guy plans to avoid paying for his food, he starts coughing and everyone, including the owner of the restaurant, scampers for safety, leaving the guy and his friend, who eat to their fill and walk away freely. Also, in a bar, Mr Fank walks and buys a drink for everyone. Out of excitement, a guy asks him where he has been for some time and the moment he mentions Italy, everyone, including the bar attendant, runs out of the bar.

**Prostitution and the struggle for survival:** Sex workers in Nigeria and worldwide have faced great challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because in-person sex is intimate by its very nature, and workers are at heightened risk of contracting the virus if they keep working (See Skye, hrw.org). And because the trade is illegal in most countries, including Nigeria, they are usually excluded from emergency assistance available to other workers. The lockdown posed a great threat for them because there was no official support from the government for them. Hence, they device ways of making ends meet during the lockdown which are reflected in the movie. In *Corona Palliative* (2020), prostitutes complained of low patronage and resorted to wearing nose masks and hand sanitisers to attract customers. The lockdown trapped cheating husbands at home with their wives. They lie to their wives to cover up when their broke "runs girls" call them...we see that when Nancy calls chief in front of his wife. Some of the girls complained that their clients

offered them fake cheques and refused to pick their calls. Crime rate also increases as a result of the lockdown. Duke resorts to robbery and in the process his friend gets killed but he survived. We also see group of boys snatching a lady's handbag.

Finally, life under coronavirus was known as the new normal; new ways of doing things emerged, even the modes of greeting changed. Because of fear of contacting Covid-19 through handshake, elites and ordinary citizens resorted to jamming their elbows or legs as a greeting. We see that played out in *Corona Palliative* (2020) when Duke and his friends meet on the street. *In the Same Breath* captures history as it's being written -- and governmental failures as they amplify worldwide tragedy". This quote is from the critics' consensus remarks from Rotten Tomatoes. The documentary received an approval rating of 96% based on reviews from 50 critics, with an average rating of 8.40/10.

The portrayal of facts or truth about a phenomenon is central to documentary as a film genre. Hence, when it comes to reflecting society, the documentary goes the extra mile to dig deep into more than what meets the eye through its investigative power and brings a cholestatic picture to the fore. *In the Same Breath* offers an in-depth account of a rapidly evolving situation. In his article "Reviews in the Same Breath" Daniels Robert, a film critic stated that the Chinese-American director/producer, Nanfu Wang has carved a niche for herself in this area of filmmaking. Her work, *One Child Nation*, which critiques China's one-child policy from a personal angle showcases her ability to successfully explore the power of the documentary medium to "work around a government censorship in order to deliver truthful, powerful stories". Daniels further noted that, "Wang has established herself as the preeminent documenter of the pain inflicted by oppressive regimes on their people" and added that "Since the nascent days of the pandemic, there have been several high-profile Covid-19 documentaries: *76 Days*, *Totally Under Control*, *The Last Cruise*, etc. None have been like Nanfu Wang's *In the Same Breath*."

The heart of Wang's non-fiction movie is hinged on Wang's conclusion that "Circumstances we consider normal created the crisis we're in now", as the story's narrator, she goes on to reveal the timeline of events and how the Chinese government downplayed the severity of the pandemic and weaved propagandist narrative to launder their image through the state-run media. She shows how the government-controlled media promote pro-regime messages of positivity. One of Wang's cameras captures a television crew coaching the medics in a hospital corridor to "Say 'Go Wuhan, Go China!'" In one of the sequences, we see an array of news anchors repeat the same report: "No evidence of human-to-human transmission." She also shows titles of documentaries with positive tones like "Life Matters," "Fighting Covid-19," and "Chinese Doctors - Angels in White" that thrived in China's airwaves at



the early period of the pandemic. Nanfung Wang also claimed that the Chinese government played down the death toll in Wuhan with the official tally admitting 3,345 deaths while the real estimated fatality is put 30,000 (qtd. in Daniels 2).

Wang embarks on this journey to counter this misleading information being churned out by her government. She recounted how she gets inspired to start the project at the beginning of the film. Wang flew from her home in the US to China to spend Lunar New Year with her mother in January 2020. This was 19 days after the news of “eight people punished for spreading rumours about a new pneumonia” was aired across Chinese television networks. Wang kept her three-year-old son with her mother and flew back to the US for work. While still in US, the Chinese government locked down Wuhan after initially downplaying the seriousness of the situation on ground. Wang goes through social media posts and sees accounts of people dying in the streets and hospitals full to capacity. She quickly archived as many posts as possible knowing that the government will swiftly delete them as they were uploaded. To divulge this secret, Wang decided to use her craft of documentary film. Knowing the implication of shooting such a film in communist country ruled by a government that is bent on concealing the truth about the virus to the rest of the world, Wang deployed the “guerrilla system” of film making. She recruited a team of ten camera men on the ground in Wuhan while she directed them remotely. As expected, there were restrictions and the cameras were automatically turned off as soon the story took on a negative angle. Wang countered that by directing her team to position running cameras in high traffic areas and hospitals.

With her footage and evidence from CCTV at hand, Wang, the activist, takes us through the agony that people pass through in China. Wang shows how an older couple, Chen Runzhen and Liu Deyan, owners of a Wuhan clinic, first encountered locals complaining of colds in December 2020. The private clinic was two minutes away from the Huanan Seafood Market, the wet market where the virus was born. The patients lie in their beds, with no mobilization for emergency response from the government. With a nervous woman saying, “I’m afraid that I’ll die.” Liu himself contracted the virus and was turned away by multiple hospitals.

**Proffering Solutions** *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* strongly recommended the protection of healthcare workers as a priority. In episode one, titled “It Hunts Us” we see the employees of the NYC Health & Holargeto in the Unitetes of America where theres is similarities in the deployment of propaganda by the Trump administration which referred to the virus as a mere cold. The action succinctly juxtaposes the censorship that the Chines government enforced on its citizens by preventing them from speaking out

and telling the truth to the rest of the world against the initial messaging from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC message which stated that the wearing of masks was unnecessary, contributed to the idea that mandatory mask-wearing was an infringement on basic freedoms thereby slowing down the quick response to handle the virus with the seriousness it deserved. She proved that both governments used disinformation to water down the seriousness of the pandemic. She equally showed how healthcare workers both in China, and in the US report threats of sackings in response to their requests for better protective gears. The entire one-on-one interview with an American healthcare worker resulted in emotional breakdown, especially on the issues of shortage of personal, protective equipment (PPE) and the high death toll.

On a healthcare delivery system going through a simulation designed to assess their readiness for a major flu outbreak, Dr Mudad said: "I think one of the things that we tried to put into the simulation was healthcare workers' safety. That was one of the biggest takeaways with the previous outbreaks." While addressing some of the health workers on how "deadly respiratory disease" could be, with reference to how the 1919 influenza spread, he said, "Healthcare workers were affected and shows us where we need to improve on." During the drill, she warned, "If you're not protected if you can't protect yourself, then how are you going to protect others?" She then gives them a hypothetical scenario in which a single traveller arriving New York City by aeroplane could trigger an overwhelming outbreak that would, within weeks, incapacitate the city. Dr Mudad emphasised the need to put safety security in place for healthcare professionals through training and retraining to keep them prepared at all times.

Another solution that *Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak* proffered is the proper funding for medical research by governments. At some point, Dr Mudad is seen pleading with politicians about resources for pandemic preparedness. Dr. Sheri Fink, one of the executive-producers of the documentary said, "The work of prevention and preparedness – it's challenging to make that real to people before the bad thing happens and makes people care about it," this underscores the negligence the health institution experiences in the hands of relevant authorities that ought to cater for its need for effective and proactive service delivery.

## **Conclusion**

The study explores the power of film to predict, reflect, document and proffer solutions to emerging global health challenges. Findings reveal that in the prediction of the Covid-19 pandemic, movies forecasted its origin, mode of transmission and severity; in reflecting, movies went beyond showing the true

state of things to investigating the reactions of both the world leaders, their citizens and how they cope with the scorching effects of the pandemic and in proffering solutions, health workers' health and safety, adequate funding for scientific research and production of vaccines were emphasised.

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