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The conspicuous absence of crowds

Escape or confrontation?

How the pandemic has influenced the way we watch movies

By Isadora Campregher Paiva

How is the cinema audience reacting to the ongoing infection risk? Do people seek to temporarily escape reality by immersing themselves in tales of fantasy and romance? Film scholar Isadora Campregher Paiva has made some surprising observations.

When the COVID-19 outbreak first reached pandemic status, a curious phenomenon happened. Rather than searching for escapist entertainment to distract from the horrifying situation, many people sought films that dealt with the same problems we were going through in real life. *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011), a relatively realistic film

about the global spread of a deadly virus, was the most popular representative of this genre. Though it was a moderate success when it came out, the film had mostly been forgotten by 2020, unavailable in most streaming platforms. But as the coronavirus started to spread, so did *Contagion*'s popularity: the Google searches for the film exploded in March 2020, far surpassing the numbers for when it first came out.

This drive to watch a film that hit so close to home was certainly not the tendency for everyone. When asked about the renewed popularity of *Contagion*, one of the film's stars, Kate Winslet, said "I just felt so freaked out, why would anyone watch *Contagion*? It's about a horrible pandemic in which many people die!" (Winslet,

The pink cloud: symbol of anti-feminism, the destruction of nature – or of the pandemic? With her work shot in 2019 and released in 2020, Brazilian director Iuli Gerbase has experienced how differently films are perceived depending on the temporal context.

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2021). What explains this drive by some to see their ongoing trauma reflected on the screen? Several authors have posited that one purpose of fiction is to allow us a space to vicariously live through intense emotions and states without exposing ourselves to the complexities and risks of actually going through them (Kaes, 2009). This can be anything from the experience of danger to one's life in a horror film to the thrill of new love in a romance.

The comfort of narrative logic

But what is the point of practising what is already being experienced in the real world? Watching a pandemic film during a pandemic, particularly one as realistic as *Contagion*, bounds and orders the experience in a narrative frame

IN A NUTSHELL

- Instead of avoiding the unpleasant reality of the pandemic by watching escapist films, many people watched ones about epidemics and catastrophes at the beginning of the coronavirus crisis – such as the 2011 Hollywood film "Contagion", which was only mildly successful when first released.
- The reason for this behaviour could be that watching fictional stories serves as a kind of emotional vaccine, which prepares us for the real version. In addition, films follow a narrative logic that is comforting in contrast to real life.
- The pandemic permeates our thinking, so that all movies are seen through a new lens. While some normal social scenes might become hard to watch, dystopic scenes might suddenly seem comforting.
- The reinterpretation can go so far that some films might be said to have "predicted the coronavirus". While this can enrich a viewing experience, it can also erase the original meanings embedded in the film, as in the case of "The Pink Cloud".
- The aftermath of the Spanish flu might give us an idea of the cultural footprint COVID-19 will leave. Its traces will likely be found not only in direct or metaphoric references to the disease, but also in conspicuous absences.

that has a beginning, middle and – most importantly – an end. This was particularly important at the start of the pandemic, precisely the moment in which *Contagion's* popularity exploded, since people wanted to feel emotionally prepared for what was to come. This works as a form of emotional vaccination: By exposing ourselves to the thing we fear in a safe format, we prepare for the real version. There is a measure of escapism to a story about horrific events, since no matter how terrible, it still follows a narrative logic that is absent from real life, where disease is often random and devoid of meaning.

This obsession with pandemic narratives seems to have waned after the initial outbreak, giving way to a different type of relationship to films. As the months of confinement dragged on, the pandemic became such an all-encompassing part of our lives that, even if we tried, it was impossible to escape it. Watching characters engage in the kinds of behaviours we have been taught to avoid (coughing on their hands, gathering in groups, sharing drinks, etc.) became anxiety-inducing for many. The corollary was also true: Scenes that used to be associated with dystopic narratives, such as empty cities or people wearing masks, suddenly seemed comforting. This uncanny inversion of our usual signifiers, making ostensibly peaceful scenes tense and vice versa, is recognisable to the viewer as a misreading of a film's intentions. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore, leading to an inability to immerse oneself in the fictional world of the story.

New insight into old films

But the projection of our everyday anxieties onto films unrelated to the pandemic need not be a demerit. In some cases, it can add a new layer of meaning and relatability that enriches the experience of watching a film. In the discussions I have had in film studies classes in the last year, students routinely saw unnerving parallels to the pandemic in all types of films, no matter how old. When, for instance, the mayor of a seaside town refuses to hurt the local economy to save the lives of beachgoers in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), his behaviour was identified as eerily reminiscent of the response of several political figures during the coronavirus. While his refusal to follow the advice of specialists who warn of the imminent danger of a shark attack might have previously appeared cartoonishly misguided, it now seemed perfectly believable – and all the more terrifying for it. The parallels seem so obvious that, had *Jaws* been released in 2021, it would likely have been interpreted as an allegory for the coronavirus.

A film that was released this year has proven an interesting test case for this. Iuli Gerbase's

The Pink Cloud is a sci-fi drama in which a deadly cloud mysteriously appears around the world, forcing everyone into a lockdown that stretches on for years. The film focuses on a couple who had just had a one-night stand and find themselves compelled to foster a domestic relationship to cope with this strict confinement. Although it was written in 2017 and shot in 2019, the film's premiere in 2021 has made it necessary to add disclaimers both in the trailer and at the beginning of the film stating that "any resemblance to actual events is purely coincidental". Understandably, there is not a single review of the film that fails to mention the uncanny way it reflects our current situation. What is particularly fitting is that the film touches upon something that is rarely reflected in other stories about fictional disasters: the absolute boredom of it and humans' ability to adapt to even the most bizarre circumstances. With none of the extreme cinematic violence of other allegories for real-life pandemics (such as modern zombie films in the style of *28 Days Later* or *Train to Busan*), *The Pink Cloud* hits particularly close to home.

Meaning gained and meaning lost

Both *Contagion* and *The Pink Cloud* have been said to have "predicted" the coronavirus pandemic, in a tone that borders on the mystical. What is left on the wayside by this language is the fact that these films – like all works of art – were extrapolating from issues that existed in the period in which they were made. While our experience of these films is in some ways enriched by our current situation, there is also a loss of the meaning that had been embedded in the work at the time it was made. In the case of *Contagion*, not only were previous epidemics such as SARS and H1N1 sources of inspiration, but the film was primarily based on the research of scientists who carefully delineated what could happen in a pandemic. The fact that the film's virus first develops in China and is originally transmitted by a bat is not freakishly prophetic, but grounded in scientific knowledge of risk areas available at the time the film was made.

Because of its release during the COVID-19 pandemic, the media discourse surrounding *The*

Pink Cloud has been even more mystical. In reviews, writer and director Iuli Gerbase is repeatedly called "a prophet" and "a clairvoyant". On the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, the critics consensus reads "An eerily relevant debut from writer-director Iuli Gerbase, *The Pink Cloud* reaches into the emotional fault lines of *pandemic* life and comes away with striking observations about human behavior." (*The Pink Cloud* (2021), 2021, emphasis added). It is telling that the word used here is pandemic, rather than quarantine, which would be more accu-



Photo: ulstern bild - United Archives / PictureLux / T

rate. The toxic cloud in the film has little in common with the coronavirus, apart from the fact that it is a worldwide phenomenon which forces people to stay inside their homes.

The Pink Cloud – pandemic wins out over feminism

Asked about the effects of this coincidental synergy, Gerbase notes that she was immediately scared it would limit the possible readings of the film:

"When I wrote the script, I had imagined many possible meanings for the pink cloud. For me, the most obvious and present one is the aspect of feminine repression and forced monogamy. [The protagonist] is forced into a model of

Seems somehow familiar: The US film "Contagion" from 2011 seems to have predicted many aspects of the coronavirus pandemic, e.g. looted supermarket shelves. In 2020, the film, originally only moderately successful, experienced an impressive renaissance.



Photo: picture alliance/PictorialLux/The Hollywood Archive | The Legacy Collection

Old films seen in a new light: Mayor Vaughn (left, Murray Hamilton) in "Jaws" refuses to restrict tourism to protect bathers. From today's perspective, misguided but not unrealistic behaviour.

womanhood that society expects her to follow and that's also where the pink color of the cloud comes in. But there were lots of other possible interpretations, of it being some kind of punishment or revolt from nature, or even that it could be a metaphor for urban violence and how we end up locked inside our homes. With the pandemic, the first thing I thought was 'my God, people are going to see the movie and it will be *'The COVID Cloud'*" (Gerbase, personal interview, 9 March 2021).

Indeed, only a handful of reviews note the allegorical reading of the cloud as an embodiment of traditional femininity, which would likely have been the dominant one had the film been released a year earlier. The female protagonist of *The Pink Cloud*, initially a fiercely independent woman resistant to having kids, is compelled by circumstance into a monogamous heterosexual relationship and motherhood. Through the use of filters, the deceptively beautiful light of the cloud permeates every shot, bathing the film in rose-tinted irony.

Gerbase also sees a silver lining in the timing of the film's release, pointing out that people relate to the characters on a much more visceral level than she could have expected. The extra

attention that the coincidence brought has also likely helped the film to be accepted into the prestigious Sundance Film Festival, where it premiered. Still, Gerbase notes that *The Pink Cloud's* topical nature can make distributors cautious to buy the film at this stage, afraid that, after a year of seclusion, people are looking for more escapist fare.

Spanish flu as blueprint

Distributors have good reasons to be wary, as it is hard to predict what audiences will be drawn to in the future. The experience of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic might give us an idea of the effects COVID-19 will have on the types of films that are made. Dubbed "the forgotten pandemic" by historian Albert Crosby (2003), the so-called "Spanish flu" left an allegedly scant cultural footprint in the art and entertainment of the decades that followed it. Recent scholarly works have revised this narrative, however, pointing out that the effects of this deadly pandemic are to be found in a wide variety of cultural works, though typically in oblique or metaphorical form (Outka, 2020). Once one knows what to look for, the footprints of the pandemic can be seen in many forms, from the influenza-



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weakened heart of Mrs Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's eponymous novella (1925) to the plague spread by the vampire in the German film *Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922). The cultural legacy of COVID-19 will likely be similarly layered, to be found not only in direct or even metaphoric references to the disease, but also in the conspicuous absence of crowd scenes and shared straws. The one thing we can all be certain of is that the meaning we ascribe to films is affected by the circumstances in which we watch them and will therefore change over time. It will be up to future film scholars and historians to parse out – and routinely re-assess – the pandemic's long-term cinematic effects. ●



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