



## Cinema in facing the Crisis: Case of *World War Z* and *Songbird*

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*An abundance of Art was dedicated to symbolizing the period of Covid-19. Yet, Cinema evidently saw these pandemic years coming long before they arrived. Hollywood films are known for their aesthetic complexity and their realistic and fictional scenarios of catastrophe and destruction, alien invasions, natural disasters, and wars. They predicted what life over the past years would look like: social distancing, time loops, fear of contamination, the spread of false formation, politicization of public soundness, and quarantine. This article is confined to three apocalyptic movies while producing commentaries on how society obtains inspiration from these films to deal with real-life crises. This article also argues that media impacts the viewer's social life, thoughts and emotion, and to a lesser extent, his behaviour in times of crisis. Audiences do not just examine the meaning of a film but rather adapt it. This article situates *World War Z*, *Songbird* and *Contagion* in the broad context of apocalyptic Cinema and looks at their effect on creating societal challenges by implementing scientific theories which cause narrative shifts from worlds of fiction to real-life scenarios that are more likely to occur.*

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### 1. Introduction

The seventh Art, Cinema, has witnessed various waves of change only to be able to create the change. It evolved from being an aesthetic set of moving pictures to becoming a stylistic narrative device. The film is an influential and powerful form of art which does not serve entertainment purposes only, as it used to do in the past. The film was able to cover the thrill of science and the depth of literature but mostly paved the way for complex real-life situations and scenarios.

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## **How did it start?**

Naturally, Cinema is the extreme form of expression. It is a narrative art form, rather, a very immediate one. It can -effortlessly- transcend the depths. It is considered a massive source of entertainment, yet, it is a very delicate one nonetheless. Early theorists, such as André Bazin, argued within his 1940s essays that were later on collected in a book entitled *Qu'est-ce que le Cinéma?* (1967) that Cinema is a portrayal of reality that captures "the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (p.14). For Bazin, Cinema is art for 'creating a language' of its own. The evolution of this language crossed a long –anachronic- road, starting from the silent films of 1928 to the upbringing of 1940. The aesthetics of film never duped the competition against the rest of the arts.

Bazin, accordingly, inserts a conclusive comment in his classical essay "The evolution of the language of cinema" (1950), that film does not only add to the reality, but it can also reveal it throughout its artistic form that took the shape of two trends: directors who believed in the image (i.e. Montage) and directors who believed in reality by seasoning films with sound, time and space, thus, their juxtaposition raised film and film making as an art, "the film-maker is no longer a competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelists" (Bazin, p.1).

Cinema was first entitled the sixth Art by the Italian theoretician Ricciotto Canudo in his work *The Birth of the Sixth Art* (1911). He alluded to the Hegelian art form "Pantheon of art" (Hegel 90) and suggested that Cinema is the missing chain, the synthesis of what Hegel had already started, a continuum to the aesthetics. First and foremost, Hegel outlined his lectures *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1975) and elaborated precisely that "...our science is Philosophy of Art and, more definitely, Philosophy of Fine Art (23), in which he unpacked all that he considered "the spacious realm of the beautiful".

Picciotto Canudo was immensely influenced by the Hegelian list; thus, he thought of continuity. However, he reconsidered his review later on in his work *Reflections on the Seventh Art* (1923) by ranking the dance as the sixth Art whereas the Cinema as the seventh because it was cinema challenges reality. Modern technology has expanded the accessibility to film, making the connection between Cinema and society a prominent topic of inquiry. The most common research has analyzed literature and television's association with the society, but few have applied this approach to Cinema.

Film viewing is an aesthetic experience. It combines different art forms of media such as images, sound, narrative and language, and it makes them act together in order to create a different set of meanings that informs one another. Barone and Eisner state that "Art is essential to what it communicates and critically affects its reception. Art-based research is, at its deepest level, about artistic and aesthetic approaches to raising and addressing social issues." (2012, p. 57).

## **2. Title**

### **2.1 First Subtitle**

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### ***3. Cinema in times of crisis***

The year 2019 was a shocking year that left the world paralyzed in front of the spread of various viruses ranging from Wuhan, China and resumed to outstretch world wild. Due to the rapid and vast scattering scale of the spread of these viruses, they were later confirmed as a pandemic. These viruses threatened the safety of humanity and forced the whole world to attempt to research more information and solutions to limit the losses. Similarly, in the seventh Art, the pandemic inspired many great stories and uplifted them into the cinematic world.

#### ***3.1 Pandemic reality portrayed in cinema***

This article is going to examine two categories of the film; the imaginary as a filmic reality: Apocalyptic film entitled "*World War Z*" (2013). And a reality beyond imagining, such as the film *Songbird* 2020, inspired by the coronavirus as a present case of study, and the SARS pandemic from 2003 to 2004 along with the bird flu pandemic in 2009 produced a film entitled "*Contagion*" as a past case of study.

#### ***3.2 The imaginary as a filmic reality***

Films tend to have more popularity if they are a work of fiction. But how much reality can a fiction scenario uphold? Christian Metz mentioned in his essay *On the Impression of Reality in the Cinema*, "More than the latest play or novel, a film, with its "impression of reality," it is very direct hold on perception, and has the power to draw crowds." (p.21), And those impressions indeed are the main factor that separates a film from reality, they can be impressions of a real situation, but never the real situation itself. Hence "filmic reality" is considered to be imaginary and a rewarding attribute.

### ***4-World War Z, as a case of study***

Throughout literary history, the reflection of a world in a work of fiction as reality-to-be has proven itself evident and recognized as coincidence. Over time, the mixture of both imagination and intuition with the constantly transforming technological assets encouraged the fabrication of a multitude of time frames that became a reality over time or destined to be true in the future.

*World War Z* is a film based on an apocalyptic horror novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006) by Max Brooks, a New York Times bestseller. It was released on the twenty-first of June 2013, directed by Marc Forster. According to Robbin, wood horror films are considered "our collective nightmares and depend for their existence on a certain relaxation of consciousness" (2015, p.212). The novel and the film demonstrate the validity of the contemporary renaissance of the zombies in popular culture that numerous academics have addressed. Stefan Dolgert argues that "Zombies are merely (rotting) bodies ... waiting as empty vessels to be filled with whatever content a theorist might choose to provide them" (2014:13)

The film presents a hero who is sent on a journey to travel the world in order to find a way to contain the zombie pandemic. This film's incidents were modified from the original novel by the director only to predict actual occurrences that might happen in daily life.

Brooks deliberately modified the public image of the zombies. The classic zombies are known as dead living and reanimated corpses, whereas in the film, they were introduced as human beings who are swift and vicious, and once they get bitten, they transform within twelve seconds. Brook also had an ulterior motive as he introduced this new concept of zombies, who are living beings who feel empty and dead. They rejected stability and refused to build borders to construct their world.

*World War z* portrays the ideal example to comprehend the paradigm of immunization throughout several threatening occasions witnessed in the history of humanity. Indeed, every film contains obscure and overt messages. In T. W. Adorno's book "How to look at Television", he mentions that "the full effect of the material on the spectator cannot be studied without consideration of the hidden meaning in conjunction with the overtone" (Adorno, p.221). The film also inspired people to find their own solutions during the covid pandemic by creating 'walls' of social distancing and inspired the thought of searching for the origin of the virus in order to create a cure while producing a vaccine with the same essence of the virus to help the body cope with any future contamination. The zombies are the perfect device to incarnate the virus from which humanity should protect itself. *World war Z* is a contemporary invasion narrative of the zombie apocalypse. It should be pointed out that Marc Foster's zombies have no gender, no family, or any respect or position to "...no boundaries biological, social, geographical or political not even the most fundamental of boundaries: that between life and death" (Hubner, 2015, p.215). These Zombies were a plague that aimed to destroy civilization, "driven to spread the zombie virus as far and wide as possible" (Redfern & Steiger, 2014, p.316-317). During the film, the fear of Otherness was represented thoroughly, but there was also the fear of having "no distinction between one and other, them and us. It is a breakdown of all context, and therefore of meaning" (Redfern & Steiger, p.202).

#### ***4-1 Society in the eyes of World War Z***

This film does not only mark or support the narrative of pandemics and/or apocalypse. *World War Z* also presents solutions to these apprehensions of invasion and loss of identity. In the film, the main character Gerry (Brad Pitt) used to operate with the United Nations. His job demands to travel to different locations to discover the origin of the zombie outburst. Gerry was also bound to find feasible solutions. The majority of cities globally were plagued and destroyed by zombies, except for one safe place due to the construction of walls that prohibit the undead from infiltrating their walls and infecting the inhabitants.

Within the film, the phenomenon of constructing walls to separate nations was heavily present. Wendy Brown (2010), a political theorist, explained how this political phenomenon could translate into an icon of the nation's sovereignty deterioration. The loss of the theological freedom promised by the nation has many effects on the subjects that envision the security and containment of walls. Brown also pinpoints an existing popular desire for walling the late modern subjects that fear the loss of their horizons, order, and essence that the apocalyptic zombie exemplifies.

Gerry embarks on his journey after a detailed discussion with a CAI agent, he moves to Jerusalem and interviews the individual responsible for the fortification of the immunity walls, and he answers

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him accordingly: "Probably most people don't believe something can happen until it already has." The film proceeds to show policies of security and prevention as a necessary measures. The Zombies represent the harmful outsider that might trespass, corrupt and eradicates the community, which is why the walls were depicted as crucial as they contain and protect the nation from the Other. Although in the film, the Jerusalem Salvation Gates were not enough to provide protection and hundreds of zombies get to pass through.

Gerry realizes that it's too late to build any further walls, so he is bound to find an ulterior solution by finding the origin of the zombie virus and generating a vaccine. He used his genes on healthy individuals in order to immunize them from being infected. Halfway through the film, the scientist confides in him and says: "even if you are right [...] infecting the populace with a lethal illness is not exactly a cure." Yet, it was clearly stated that this plan was not a cure but rather a camouflage. Contaminating healthy individuals with a virus is the only way to become imperceptible to the zombies.

#### ***5-Songbird as a case of study:***

The film *Songbird* was written in the first year of the covid-19 pandemic and produced in 2020 by Adam Mason. It translates different possibilities and creates what-ifs situations that have been occupying everyone's mind at the time. Victor Burgin argues, " if audiovisual forms are inherently discursive, then an intellectual argument can equally well be presented in the form of a film or video as in a more conventional written form." (2006, p. 6) *Songbird* was a cinematic piece that helped to shape an imaginary future (2023) based on real-life current events.

In the *Songbird* interpretation of covid-23 events, life did not improve as the latest virus is the most lethal, with a 56 per cent mortality rate. There has been a clear, strict division between those with strong immunity who carries a yellow bracelet and those who don't and who are forced to stay indoors at all costs. If someone fails their day-to-day temp test or is in a close relationship with someone who does, that individual will be relocated to a Q-Zone by force, a concentration camp where they are left to die. Nico (KJ Apa) is the main character with strong immunity to the virus. He delivers packages and makes savings for a getaway to Big Sur, where life is safe, along with his partner, Sara (Sofia Carson), who is looked down in her apartment with her relative.

Indeed, there is an unmistakable terror in witnessing a thriller created from a version of the stern reality that humanity has been facing during the covid pandemic. Inserting real elements people are familiarized with and using them to create a darker future was mightily adequate. The less fantastical scenes were the most appealing ones to the audience. *Songbird* has proven that the depth of a scenario is irrelevant compared to the fact that it deals with a crisis and negotiates the whys and hows. The film also reflected spectacularly on those who live and work in a place where events were mishandled.

Audiences find comfort in watching the characters make their outbreak as they encounter infected people by the dozens who display monstrous stomach-turning and striking symptoms that cast them out of humanity. At the same time, their cities and world systems simply collapse. Admittedly,

characters in these scenarios are instructed to distrust authority. The reason behind this rebellion is due to social institutions that are seen as helpless and sometimes harmful even. These circumstances make the characters forced to take their paths into their own hands. They adopt extermination and exclusion and give up on empathy since it associates with the weak.

*Songbird* is a symbol of an outbreak triumph thriller that was created during desperate times. It was recognized for what it achieved technically. The anti-escapist topical gimmick will always remain irresistible. Giroux asserts that he is more invested in examining Cinema as the main contributor to a large set of hegemonic discourses. Whether films causally impact individuals is beside the point. He mentioned that he cannot confirm if "[...]there is a direct correlation between what people see, hear and read and how they act." He considered the film a civic engagement pledge and public pedagogy. The film " creates a climate that helps to shape individual behaviour and public attitudes in multiple ways, whether consciously or unconsciously."

### ***6-Cinema facing the pandemic crisis***

In fact, both movies, though at first sight, are far from being similar or have common points, yet they are dealing with the same core topic but differently .what is the reaction of people facing any pandemic situation. It clearly appears in both movies that there are two kinds of people: those who accept the situation and live with it as it comes waiting for death or a lucky survival. The second category is those who want to change the situation, non-conformists, ready to face danger to find the solution even if it costs their life.

The first movie *World War Z* is a disaster movie that gives a chaotic situation where man has no chance to find a solution due to the rapid spread of the virus. People are looking only for a shelter away to save their life by confining themselves, and they accept their destiny. Two examples are presented in this movie but are representative of the majority of people :

- The Thomas family: parents of the little boy who refused to follow Garry Lane's family thought they were certain that it was the only way to be safe, but they accepted to confine themselves and required Garry to take their only son. It seems to be not logical they people know that they are risking their lives in confinement, but they accept the situation because of fears and terror that dominate them. It is the case for millions of people during COVID 19 when people confined themselves to their homes under the respect of the government recommendation and even without fearing death beyond the doors, diminishing their immunity rate and becoming easily infected candidates.

The scientific team in Edinburgh: Though they are scientists, their confinement inside the laboratory symbolizes the despair of the first people who were supposed to fight the virus. Garry finds the team not only fearing the zombies but even the same people. The degree of terror lets them cut off any relationship with the world as if they were sure that there is no cure for the disease and then wait for the end of the crisis, whether by their death or by miraculous survival.

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The second movie, *Songbird*, is less disastrous than the first by portraying the daily life situation of people during COVID 19. The same category of people who are in obligatory confinement all over the world, including in the United States of America, accept their destiny to stay at home and wait, whether for death or survival. It is well summarized in the scene when Nico goes to see his beloved, and she refuses to open the door for fear of being infected or infecting his lover, though Nico is naturally immune. The terror of the virus put people in a kind of comfort zone inside homes where the idea of outside seemed far from their imagination.

The second category of people is those who reject the idea of accepting the situation without fighting, looking for a solution to survive by saving the whole world or saving their relations. In *WWZ*, Garry represents the kind of person who is trying to find a solution, a cure that may improve or save the world. The heroic aspect is not the most important but that of the followers who believed in him as the soldier in Korea who sacrificed his life to protect the hero, and all who believed in him were those who rejected the idea of staying in confinement waiting for better days or death.

In *songbird*, Nico is the young protagonist who refuses the situation and enhanced people to get out of the trap of confinement. It is clearly manifested in the last scene when he takes his beloved and runs away from the confinement nightmare for other horizons symbolizing that the cure comes from the belief in life.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Sociological film philosophers emphasize that art forms like films are generative of reality and not just reflective. Indeed, films produced for the mass market as disaster flicks and zombie apocalypses discussed in this article likely have a more profound influence on society in comparison to those created for critics alone. Henceforward, the narratives they contain were and still are valuable contexts for the global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of Cinema's public culture, they inevitably shaped how people around the world decided whether to believe in the gravity of covid-19, trust governance and yield to the public health proposals.

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