EXAMINATION ON THE REFLEXIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DISEASE AND VISUAL MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

My interdisciplinary analysis of historical visual representation of disease and modern cinematic media has concluded that there is a notable reflexive relationship between how we choose to portray disease in visual media and our perception of disease in reality. The way we represent the monstrous in horror cinema, how audiences respond to disaster cinema, and media-led societal responses to the AIDS crisis are all linked in a cycle of cultural understanding of disease and how it is thus portrayed. However, during the current Covid-19 crisis, I have had the unique experience to watch the research and conclusions I have drawn unspool in real time. With Covid, it is possible to watch how this feedback loop occurs and how cinema has impacted responses to the pandemic in our postmodernist society.

Fig. 1. Leo Varadkar's St. Patrick's Day speech 2020; Fig. 2. Gary Oldman as Churchill, Darkest Hour 2017;
Fig. 3. Morgan Freeman, Deep Impact 1998; Fig. 4. Michael Douglas, The American President 1995.

ANALYSIS

Cinema has irrevocably changed the way in which we perceive reality. Baudrillard, in Simulacra and Simulation, describes the society we now live in as a simulation; more specifically, that we only interact with symbols and signs of which have no origin any longer. Our culture is often built around our understanding of repeating and editing processes and identities that are no longer legitimate in a nature other than mimicry, which often leads to us mimicking that which we see on screen. This has often led to a development of identity around perceptions of reality in media we consume. With regards to Covid-19, society has no frame of reference outside of cinema. The last global pandemic of this scale was before the living memory of most people and before the widespread adoption of cinema as a primary means of entertainment and visual representation.

Society has no frame of reference for a disaster of this scale beyond the semiotic lexicon given to the audience through cinema and our continued interaction with the semiotics of cinema as a form of culture has affected our ability to process the Covid-19 pandemic outside of representing it through serieses of signs and symbols. Above many other forms of education or entertainment in the early days of the pandemic, people across the world turned to pandemic film. Outbreak had risen from relative disinterest in the preceding years to the 4th most popular film on Netflix by the middle of March 2020. At the same time, Contagion quickly became the 7th most popular film on iTunes, despite only ranking 270th the previous year. People were increasingly turning to film in search of a cinematic happy ending for a situation that hadn't yet unfolded.

Politicians and informative media were both susceptible to the human impulse to view Covid-19 through the lens of the simulation, and keen to manipulate that viewpoint in the audience. Former UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock claimed that the film Contagion inspired his requests for vaccine supplies in a 2021 interview. In discussing the film in an otherwise informational setting, this lends legitimacy to the simulated cinematic portrayal of disease at almost a higher level than the actual reality; Contagion is something to aspire to, rather than a work of entertainment, giving it a sense of importance above literal happenings. In a way, adherence to placing the cinematic as a not just attainable, but desirable or even necessary concept, is evident in much of the lexicon used in delivering information. Former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar's St Patrick's Day speech in 2020 is such an example.

In this speech, Varadkar invokes the icon of the cinematic president seen often in disaster cinema, who must guide a nation in the face of calamity. A disaster of the magnitude and nature of Covid-19 was still inconceivable outside of the cinematic lens, and thus the delivery of this address was fashioned on reference points such as disaster cinema and Churchill's 1940 speech. In the opening words of this speech, where he speaks of how future generations will remember this, Varadkar is also invoking nostalgia not only for something that is currently happening, but which hasn't finished happening. It is the nature of the simulation to view life in the third-person or as an event that someone else will eventually witness. This too invokes the icon of the cinematic president, as one who addresses the cinematic audience who watches in the aftermath as well as the nation in the present simulation.

METHODOLOGY

I have conducted an interdisciplinary analysis using historical evidence and epidemiological literature to study contemporary forms of visual media, such as cinema. I have used my own experience as a filmmaker and my research into film theory to articulate what I have seen during the pandemic.

Research has been primarily qualitative, focusing on secondary desk research using a survey style approach. These findings have then been interrogated using visual methodologies such as semiology, and image sites and modalities. These findings are also interpreted through psychoanalytic and philosophical lenses where appropriate in order to contextualise them; in doing so, there are elements of border research.

ANALYSIS

Ireland's HSE informational material throughout the pandemic also shows how design thinking was impacted by the cinematic feedback loop. The vast majority of disseminated media by the HSE was coded by its use of stark yellow. Yellow is associated with warning and there is semiotic form to use yellow when signifying disease or infection, such as with toxic waste. Historically, houses would be marked with yellow to signify a present disease and later the yellow flag was adopted to signify disease aboard ships. The colour plays a huge role in pandemic films such as Contagion, where whole scenes are often tinged yellow. Shots set inside medical facilities, where staff are wearing hazmat suits, are often bright, blinding yellow in tone; yellow becomes associated with something that is unclean or infected.

The stark warning yellow the HSE used specifically is often used in protective equipment when dealing with hazardous waste, from disease to nuclear fallout. Yellow is used in conjunction with white accenting and black text for readability, with red occasionally used to denote emphasis. As a semiotic code, yellow on these posters signifies both warning and disease and invokes urgency and severity. The HSE also established a TikTok presence in May 2020 to deliver information to people who may not access broadcast media. Notably, one can also see the signature colour scheme in some of the videos posted by the HSE, with frontline workers dressed in blue, strongly contrasted against the yellow tinged background. In cinema such as Contagion, desaturated yellow lighting such as this is used to signal disease. While the safety gear worn by the frontline workers in this video also denotes hazard or emergency, the specific addition of the yellow lighting gives it the illusion of being cinematic, triggering that intrinsic fear given by cinema and further engaging with the filmic feedback loop.

Fig. 5. Contagion 2011; Fig. 6. HSE Covid-19 Informational Poster, 2020; Fig 7. HSE TikTok page, May 2020.

CONCLUSIONS

The long term effects on cinema still remain to be seen as the consequences from the Covid-19 pandemic unfold. There will undoubtedly be consequences for the screen industry resulting from social distancing practices and cultural shifts led by the crisis. However what can be seen now is that our understanding and experience of the pandemic has been influenced by the cinema consumed. In times of unprecedented crisis, society has turned to the only medium which has until now reflected this experience; fictionalised cinema. The filmic lens through which the pandemic has been viewed has affected the kinds of information that has been disseminated about Covid in the immediate term, and it remains to be seen how it will affect the future of cinema.