

Denis Newiak

IT'S ALL BEEN THERE BEFORE

What We Can Learn about the Coronavirus
from Pandemic Movies

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Numbers indicate playing time in minutes.

Marginalia summarize the core statement of a paragraph.

Marginalia indicate possible concrete options for action within the examined material.

TOLD YOU SO: A PERSONAL FOREWORD

The consequences of the virus pandemic in 2020 have caused great suffering, claimed numerous victims and changed the world forever. There is no doubt that the losses and cuts caused by the Covid-19 disease, which impacts people everywhere, are severe and painful. However, as devastating as the plague may be, it was certainly not *surprising* – even it is uncommon and uncomfortable to say so. The real surprise about the Corona Crisis was how surprised everyone was, and how decision-makers and politicians seemed to be overwhelmed by the situation. On the one hand, the history of the 20th century has shown that an increasingly intertwined, mobilized and globalized world has a clear tendency for new types of pathogens to spread rapidly within it – impacting all spheres of social coexistence. Just think of the still ongoing HIV pandemic which is estimated to have killed at least 35 million people. On the other hand, experts from science and research have repeatedly warned that it is only a matter of time before mankind will have to deal with a serious pandemic again.

These warnings, which were primarily addressed to political decision-makers (who have the means for disaster control and crisis management) unfortunately went largely unheard. There is no other explanation for the serious cuts in everyday social life and, above all, the barely comprehen-

sible economic collateral damage resulting from Covid-19 pandemic management. Yet the costs of adequate crisis prevention would have been only a fraction of what now has to be provided in the form of rescue packages, liquidity assistance and economic stimulus packages. While it would feel more comfortable to blame somebody for the pandemic, it is neither possible nor desirable: even the experts could not foresee the exact form, timing and extent of the pandemic – they only knew that something was coming. “The problem with most people is that they don’t believe something can happen until it already has. It’s not stupidity or weakness. It’s just human nature,” explains a film character in *World War Z* who had foreseen a zombie pandemic and warned about it relentlessly, while the rest of the audience unanimously hoped it wouldn’t be so bad (*World War Z* 53).

As so often in pandemic movies and TV series, one individual in this end-time thriller goes against the prevailing opinion of the many who are unanimous that a global epidemic with fatal consequences is too unlikely to be worth preparing for with the same dedication as against other late modern risks. In recent years, film and television have increasingly taken over this ‘thankless’ role of swimming against the current of appeasement and postponement: anyone (not even talking about those with a weakness for medicine, history or virology) who strays, but who at least occasionally strays into the cinema, zaps through television programs, or sporadically uses new types of streaming services, must sooner or

later have come across one of the now countless warning pandemic scenarios that have been created by popular film and television culture. Stories of rapidly spreading diseases have always been an attractive, spectacular topic for dramaturges and directors from film and television (and have therefore always been blessed with high viewer numbers and have always been part of cultural history). However, the abundance of such stories since 2000, with a temporary peak not long before the COVID-19 pandemic, is astonishing. Whether almost documentary dramas such as *Contagion*, martial blockbusters in the style of *Outbreak*, more subtle art films à la *Blindness*, the endless series of zombie films and series such as *The Walking Dead* – nowadays it is hardly possible to escape the countless virus narratives that have found their way into contemporary culture in the most diverse forms of presentation.

In principle, people consciously seek out cinemas and television couches for relaxation or entertainment and for the sociability associated with it – but at the same time, films and television series take on other functions. The individual viewer does not necessarily have to be aware of these functions, but is nevertheless deliberately exposed to them: film and television allow us to participate in otherwise unknown or inaccessible times, places and milieus, to negotiate individual, interpersonal and social relationships and conflicts, and in this way, they draw attention to new relevant contemporary discourses and the challenges they pose. Films and fictional

television speak out about what is currently hanging in the social air without being expressed concretely, thereby making collective hopes and fears speak for themselves before they have even made their way into the general linguistic discourse. In doing so, they transfer confusing contexts into vivid, empathetic, popular art forms. Climate change, for example, is a topic that has been filling scientific congresses and academic publications since the 1970s and is increasingly occupying politicians. However, the slow and not always concretely visible consequences of climate change in everyday perception are harder to grasp – which can partly explain the hesitant intervention (and thus the loss of valuable time) and possibly even the disturbing denials of climate change. It is only with the advent of high-profile cinema productions such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (USA 2004), documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (USA 2006) and the permanent thematization in TV series of all genres that climate change has not only been given a general hearing but has also taken on a visible and thus vivid present form. Only these ‘visual discourses’ generate a direct confrontation, allowing society to debate how to prepare for the future. Cinematic artefacts thereby construct a certain reality and create a general consensus about what is meaningful and what is not, what makes sense and what is true. On the one hand, this strong reality-founding function of all media must always be questioned critically, on the other hand, the social purpose with its incalculable

importance for communication and the production of meaning in society as a whole cannot be denied.

However, film and television make complex social megatrends (e.g. the potential consequences of the use of artificial intelligence, widespread power blackouts, and interplanetary colonization as well as very present problems, such as social inequalities and increasing social isolation) not only perceptible by the senses and thus part of our reality. Filmic forms actively intervene in the lively discourses themselves like hardly any other art or medium. They take a stand for or against certain attitudes, and make proposals for overcoming undesirable developments. In doing so, film and TV are imagining fantastic, but at the same time very vivid, almost tangible ideas of a desirable counter-world, in whose utopias the errors of the real present have been overcome. Even if these narratives are often imbued with a naïve belief in progress, which must not be accepted without questions, film and television thus not only enable a sensitization to future challenges and a macrosocial discourse on how to deal with them. They also provide a (visual and acoustic) perspective on a desirable vision of a good life, which gives hope for change and thus makes individual commitment to the specific, collectively desirable goal attractive.

The same can be said about the fictional pandemic scenarios. They surprisingly early on recognized one of the most important challenges of life in late modernity, brought it into the general discourse and provided it with its own connotations.

Although the spread of Covid-19 was not associated with an anarchic zombie apocalypse, as we know it from *The Walking Dead*, television viewers and casual cineasts alike intuitively understand very well that, behind the superficially banal phenomena of popular culture, which outwardly serve above all to amuse and distract, there is a multi-layered, complex thicket of meanings that cannot be easily unraveled. Everybody needs to somehow make it through the dense undergrowth of exaggerations and stereotyping, production calculations and ingratiation with target groups, simplification and pomposity – but after that, we can see the potential of these important art forms of late modernism to point out social trends and imbalances with a critical gesture, long before they become part of public and political discussion.

In the case of pandemic films, which has been celebrating a sustained boom for several years now, one could almost speak of a prophetic potential of the medium: film and television have not only warned of the devastating consequences of such a scenario by over-thematizing a possible dangerous outbreak of a new type of infectious disease. They have also taken a stand and, in some cases, made astonishingly concrete recommendations for action on how to orient oneself in unknown threatening situations, i.e. how to deal with the short, medium and long-term consequences. Of course, entertainment formats such as *Designated Survivor* or sophisticated dramas such as *Children of Men* do not have any universally applicable ‘patent solutions’

for all the problems associated with pandemics that could simply be transferred into everyday life, and that is neither their task nor feasible. However, film and television, hidden among their aesthetically encoded appearances, contain a vast store of knowledge that can be harnessed to better manage challenging situations. But cinematic phenomena as art forms do not directly release this knowledge, and it can even be scattered between narrative-aesthetic contradictions, conflicting interests and problematic connotations, an attentive and critical reading, analysis and contextualization is necessary, since staging, dramaturgy and figure drawing make attributions that first have to be decoded.

Typically, this ‘decryption’ happens quite naturally at the moment of the film and television experience. This compact book tries to ‘speed up’ this complex and time-consuming individual process with the goal to make the arts’ important knowledge useful for the current situation as well as for possible future pandemic crises: What kind of scenarios regarding the causes, developments, and consequences of pandemics does the genre develop? Which fields of action and conflict emerge and how are they evaluated? And what kind of concrete behavioral proposals do film and television make to meet the challenges of a pandemic? Film and television do not reveal this valuable information on their own: as experienced cinemagoers and television viewers, we have learned to extract from filmic experiences those behavioral fragments that seem potentially meaningful and useful for everyday

life. From childhood on, we intuitively know how to do that. As a ‘watching’ society, we understand the fictional scenarios as offers (which we always may refuse) of how to behave appropriately in a society. Anyone who has watched a few apocalypse films may well admit that the official recommendation from national disaster control and civil protection agencies to keep a food supply for at least two weeks can at least not be harmful. At the same time, every art form thrives on exaggerations, inner contradictions, and conscious distortions in order to condense complex relationships, but also to maintain our reception interest through tension arcs and the production of affect, which promises both immaterial and commercial success. The film and television industry, like any other business, is subject to certain materialistic and ideological constraints which can affect production conditions and narratives and thus lead to distortions of what one hopes to take from a film or television series as a supposed ‘meaning.’ Filmmakers and television makers are not free from narcissistic interests, economic pressures, and human errors – but the collective mode of production, the effort to attract a large interested (and thus potentially paying) audience, and a healthy degree of shyness in the face of possible scandals caused by embarrassing mistakes, creates an astonishing trustworthiness of this art form – and we have been proving our trust in films for more than a century now. By not simply accepting and imitating what we see without question as a supposed ‘truth,’ but rather understanding

it as a concrete construction of possible realities, we have come to know cinema and television as two of many sources that can help us recognize and work on the most pressing contemporary questions and find answers for a good life in the risky, opaque and lonely 21st century.

The present book is intended to enable interested readers to become acquainted with thematizations, staging, and recommendations in pandemic films and series, so that they can use them for their own conscious, reflected, and considered actions during the current health and social crisis, without having to deal with all the subtleties of media, film, and television theory or having necessarily seen all the works discussed in this book. At the same time, the offered interpretations can lend a new dimension of meaning to an early reception experience and further enrich one's own cinematic wealth of experience. Since the urgent social, political, and economic issues raised by the current Covid-19 pandemic are likely to remain in the limelight for some time to come, this book is intended to contribute to initiating and conducting a dialogue on how we as a global community can jointly master the challenges of such health and social crises, rather too early than too late. The following text was originally intended for publication in a highly specialized circle of media experts. I apologize to the reader that this resulted in the jargon and structure of the text, which was tolerated in order to make the findings quickly accessible through a speedy publication. At the same

time, I would ask my colleagues in the field to kindly overlook the fact that this is not a film and television science treatise in the conventional sense, but that, in view of the acute need, the opportunity should be taken to re-function the academic toolbox in such a way that possible findings that could be relevant and helpful here and now can be discussed in good time.

By opening up the work to a generally interested group of readers, I hope to be able to make at least a small contribution to ensuring that the rich treasure of knowledge from film and television plays an even greater role in everyday crisis management. The book is aimed not only at cineastes, ‘series junkies’ and those who might want to become one after reading it, but also at decision-makers at all political levels, who are expected to make prudent decisions under largely unknown conditions. As an extract of cinematic pandemic knowledge (especially in the form of short summaries of the core statements for each paragraph), the book is intended to help people, who have assumed responsibility for others, to quickly extract the movies’ and TV shows’ most important recommendations for action from the material. I hope that this book may help reflect and debate the media’s ideas critically, assess them in all their conceivable consequences, and ultimately perhaps even allow them to influence political decision-making. It is a matter close to my heart – especially in view of the performance strengths and limitations of the qualitative humanities, which I am aware of – to actively participate in the urgent and important discourse on the ‘what

now?’ in the Covid-19. However, my aim is not to take a stand for or against a particular measure, but rather to show how film and television would position themselves on a concrete question with which we are currently confronted. Every hermeneutic reading and analysis of a work of art, even with the strictest methodological procedures, always has something subjective attached, so that one should be committed to and fairly argue about the resulting findings, the present condensed study strives at all times to maintain a critical distance to its object of investigation. Nevertheless, we should be aware that precisely in a crisis situation, in which important modern achievements are called into question by some, in which great trials await the liberal lifestyle and earlier errors threaten to return, the commitment to the values of a free, peaceful, democratic and dignified way of life must not fall victim to a misunderstood commitment to academic neutrality or to certain current speaking habits.

I would like to thank my family, colleagues (especially my PhD supervisor Prof. Christer Petersen) and good friends who were willing to read parts of the manuscript written with a hot pen and to help me to bring the text into a reasonable form despite time constraints. While specialist publications like to take a little more time (for good reasons), I would like to thank the publishing house for the fact that in this particular case everything was done – even under the current difficult conditions – to put the book out so quickly that it still reaches its readership as long as we all have to struggle with this great

challenge. The guidance offered by the movies and shows may also prove helpful should we again be confronted with a pandemic in the future. Perhaps we can surprise ourselves once again by emerging together stronger from this to date biggest test of the 21st century, and then tackle the other pressing social, environmental, and political problems together.

Denis Newiak
Potsdam, Germany, June 2020

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