
Cinema and Digital Platforms: Pandemic Configurations of Text, Context and Technology

Can Türe
(Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey)
can.ture@bilgi.edu.tr

Ebru Cigdem Thwaites Diken
(Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey)
ebru.diken@bilgi.edu.tr

Conventional media theories, including mediatization theory, network theory and actor network theory, are dominated by the idea that the emergence of information/communication technologies are driven by human need and address global social problems. However, as is the case with the use of interactive digital media platforms during the corona virus pandemic, technologies turn illnesses into opportunities and introduce new logics of governmentality.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1977 [1975]) writes on how the fight against the plague has produced the raw material for disciplinary technologies. Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine that the so-called war against the coronavirus will produce a range of truths, discourses and, above all, technologies to govern individuals and the economies of desire.

For example, video conference technologies have long been in use; yet, the pandemic enabled their latent possibilities to operate with a progressive, exponential increase of added value. Zoom was launched in 2013; yet, as of March 2020, the business has thrived with a 380% increase in the number of daily users and 77% increase in net worth.¹ Microsoft announced Teams in 2017; then, in the week before the 23rd of March 2020, the company declared a 12 million increase in the number of daily users.² Thanks to digital communication technologies, the demise of public life and the University (as universal city), online education and ‘zooming into an art work’ has never been this legitimate (Pardo and Prato 2019).³

Technology is always at first seductive. Digital communication technologies have been praised for being more agile and facilitating flat organizations. Soon after the spike in their popularity, warnings began to circulate against breaches of privacy and ‘zoom fatigue’.⁴ In a very short time span, these technologies have engendered the collapse of the boundaries between the public and the private and the reduction of different social roles (professional, parent, domestic worker, care taker) to a single social, spatial context.

The pandemic has generalized the previously exceptional use of these technologies. It has led companies to make permanent changes to people’s work conditions and virtual classrooms are now considered as viable alternatives to face education. These changes, first introduced as medical necessities and then generalized, are, in fact, political decisions.

In this context, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the interaction between science and politics. The medical sciences can produce knowledge about the development, effects and transformations of the virus and its surrounding habitat, but the necessities the

¹ <https://vulcanpost.com/696170/zoom-founder-eric-yuan-net-worth-us7-8b/>

² <https://data-economy.com/microsoft-sees-12-million-new-users-on-teams-as-remote-workers-increase-during-covid-19-pandemic/>

³ <https://www.artworkarchive.com/blog/how-to-experience-art-culture-during-coronavirus>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200421-why-zoom-video-chats-are-so-exhausting>

science points out are always complemented with political action. In this interaction between necessity and contingency, medicine increasingly becomes politicised while politics becomes medicalised, which is the very background against which governmental logics proliferate in modernity and particularly during the pandemic.

At a different level, the pandemic has had an impact on the interaction between cinema and digital platforms. Films' visual language and cultural impact have come under scrutiny in the digital era (Rombes 2009, Elsaesser 2016). The experiments with the digital video cameras and non-linear editing programmes have enabled personalized, non-commercial, low-cost independent film making and its widespread distribution. After the pandemic, exception tends to become the norm as the whole film industry is confronted with total digitalization. Films emulate forms such as Youtube videos, web series, and Netflix series. There are debates on digitalization spelling the death of cinema, which in the classic sense was the art of the masses; that is, where art meets the masses. While the coronavirus pushes life into the private domain, we witness the increasing containment of cinema within the private sphere. This is thought-provoking, because cinema is notoriously defined as the most important mass art of late modernity; one which demands a tremendous amount of collective administration in both its production and consumption. Today, cinema reaches the masses but not as an art of the masses. Rather, it is an extremely individualized art form which is consumed individually. This almost dystopic privatization was hitherto unthinkable. Online film viewers are lonely in togetherness.

This togetherness in loneliness is the source of collective paranoid and hysterias in the late modern society. One instance of this increasingly generalised mood is the production and consumption of panic in the media. By re-contextualizing the film text in the Covid-19 agenda, the inter-activity of digital platforms enables the creation of such paranoid, dystopic and apocalyptic narratives.

In what follows, we illustrate this process on the basis of the film *Contagion*, particularly the trailer spectatorship and filmic deliberation. Shortly after Covid-19 lockdowns, several online publishers compiled outbreak-related movie lists (Crucchiola and Ebiri 2020, Goldsmith 2020). Steven Soderbergh's 2011 blockbuster *Contagion* has appeared at the top of most of the Covid-19 compilations. The trailer of the movie has been online on Youtube for almost 9 years and viewed over 26 million times on the platform (Movieclips Trailers 2011).

The significance of the modern-day movie trailer lies not only in its promotional function, relaying the first impression and attracting the audience into watching the full-length movie, but also constituting a meeting and a deliberation hub for film viewers (Johnston et al. 2016: 23). Therefore, we harness the text data of the viewer comments posted under the trailer of *Contagion*, considering it as a medium in itself. In order to determine the more representative entry among many possible trailers of the movie, we ran a Youtube search with the parameters 'Contagion 2011' and selected the first result with a far higher view count. The comment data was retrieved on 6 May 2020, utilizing the video info and comments module of Youtube Data Tools (Rieder 2015), and covers a time span of almost 9 years from 14th July 2011 up to the data collection date.

has been an unprecedented phenomenon in that a global scale pandemic took place for the first time in history in a context where the global public is densely interconnected. Although limited in scope, the content analysis conducted on a single case shows that the interactive nature of digital platforms serves as a context in which individualized film-viewing experiences translate into collective paranoias and dystopic visions.

References

- Crucchiola, J. and Ebiri, B. 2020. The 79 Best Pandemic Movies to Binge in Quarantine. *Vulture*, 6 April; <https://www.vulture.com/2020/04/best-pandemic-movies-on-netflix-hulu-prime-and-more.html>. Accessed 7 July.
- Elsaesser, T. 2016. *Film History as Media Archeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*. Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam
- Foucault, M. 1977 (1975). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Goldsmith, A. 2020. How Do These Fictional Pandemics Compare to Our Own? *Town & Country*, 13 May; <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/g32419194/pandemic-movies/>. Accessed 7 July.
- Johnston, K. M., Vollans, E. and Greene, F. L. 2016. Watching the trailer: Researching the film trailer audience. *Participations*, 13 (2): 56-85.
- Movieclips Trailer. 2011. *Contagion (2011) Official Exclusive 1080p HD Trailer*, [Video]. YouTube, 15 July; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sYSyuuLk5g>
- Neuman, W. L. 2011. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Boston: Pearson.
- Pardo, I and Prato, G. B. 2019. Ethnographies of Legitimacies: Methodological and Theoretical Insights. In I. Pardo and G. B. Prato (eds), *Legitimacy: Ethnographic and Theoretical Insights*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rieder, B. 2015. YouTube Data Tools (Version 1.11) [Software]; <https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/>.
- Rombes, N. 2009. *Cinema in the Digital Age*. London and New York: Wallflower Press.
- WHO. 2020. Archived: World Health Organization Timeline - COVID-19. 27 April; <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>. Accessed 7 July.