



## Cinema in a Pandemic

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1. In my junior year of high school, I had yet to be included in a friend group. I had made many close friends at the time but didn't have a larger group to hang out with regularly, which was something I desperately wanted. I was sitting in my fourth-period English class discussing movies with my friend Diego, who made his own short films, clearly possessing a passion for the art form. We were talking about the film *Jojo Rabbit* by director Taika Waititi, and I was telling him that I've been wanting to see it, but I wasn't sure how to find a way to do that. It was an indie movie that wasn't shown in the bigger, more commercial movie theatres. He told me that the local town theatre, the Lyric Theatre, was showing the movie the following weekend. Others sitting around us heard us talking about this, and asked to join. Soon, we had a group of five or six people that wanted to go. The following Friday night, we all got together and saw the movie, and went out to dinner afterward. We decided to make this a tradition. The Lyric Theatre would show a new movie every Friday night, and to expand our movie portfolio we wanted to try to go every week, no matter the movie. And we did this every week we could, keeping it up for months. I was finally part of a group. I started to feel more settled and comfortable in my high school life. Then the pandemic hit. Not only did I lose access to a passion of mine, but I lost a group that I loved. We attempted to keep up the routine by trying to watch movies online in watch parties, but it just wasn't the same. I slowly lost contact with most people in the group. I will never know what could've come from this experience if it were able to continue. Cinema has the power to bring people together, and I didn't realize that until I had lost what I had. If Covid-19's impact on the film industry affected me, a typical

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Keywords: COVID-19, film industry, streaming services, sustained research

Citation (Modified APA)

O'Dowd, Sean. (2021, November 17). Cinema in a Pandemic. Hokies Write. <http://hokieswrite.com>.

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high school teenager, in such a major way, how did it affect the people actually involved?

2. The decisions that were made by the production and distribution companies affect all other issues concerning the current state of the industry. Companies like Warner Brothers, Disney, and Paramount all had to implement major changes that would mark movie history. To start off this major change, Universal Studios released their movie *Trolls World Tour* on April 10, 2020. Being the sequel to a mediocre animated children's movie, this movie does not have the same notoriety as other projects that were affected by this pandemic. The reason it's important is its landmark release. This is one of the first major movies to be released online, and its performance was incredible. Households could pay for access to this movie right in their living rooms, and because everybody was stuck in their homes, likely including rowdy children, what else was there to do? The movie is reported to have made over 100 million dollars within a couple of weeks, performing better than the original movie and easily profiting from the film's budget of 90 million dollars.
3. This major landmark is outlined and discussed in Mayowa Ayanbadejo's article "How has Covid-19 impacted the Evolution of Cinemas?" At the time this article was written, Ayanbadejo was a student in Pembroke College in England, and the article is a contribution to a larger student project titled "General Management in Lockdown" about the different aspects of quarantine life. Ayanbadejo's major takeaway from the release of *Trolls World Tour* doesn't have to do with the movie itself, but with the lasting effects. According to a quote from Universal Studios used by Ayanbadejo, the studio will release movies online alongside movie theatre releases. This alone is a bold statement, but Ayanbadejo offers an even larger viewpoint, stating, "There is usually a 90-day period between when a film is released and when it's available digitally, however, the success of *Trolls World Tour* has given studios increased confidence to release films online..." (10). This is a monumental discovery concerning the future of the industry.
4. Before the pandemic, a visit to the movie theatre would include previews of other upcoming films before the feature film. One of the most common phrases heard at the very end of these previews are the words "Only in theatres", meaning exactly that. When released,

these movies would only be shown in a theatre setting, and wouldn't be available anywhere else. This idea of new confidence described by Ayanbadejo changed all of this and can be seen with Warner Brothers' major decision at the end of 2020. They announced before 2021 that all of their new movies slated for release the following year would release on HBO's streaming service, HBO Max, the same day as they would release in theatres. These aren't smaller movies either, these were movies of major spectacles, such as James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad* and Denis Villeneuve's retelling of the 1965 novel *Dune*.

5. This caused discourse in the industry, with filmmakers such as Christopher Nolan, director of visual experiences *Inception* and *Interstellar*, criticizing the company for caring too much about the money and less about artistic vision. Many directors believe that movies are meant to be seen in theatres and hold the movie theatre experience in high regard. Therefore, Warner Brothers' decision to throw their movies on streaming services was offensive to some (Masters). But how fair is that when there is a worldwide pandemic going on? Sure, seeing a movie in a theatre is better than a living room TV, but when seeing a movie in a theatre could be a potential health risk, saying that the general public should be experiencing the art form how it was supposed to be shown is a little irresponsible, and is also not as profitable. Christopher Nolan released his new movie, *Tenet*, only in theatres during the pandemic, and it bombed. It made a combined 9.5 million dollars its opening weekend, which is extremely low for what would have been a blockbuster during a normal year. (Brueggemann)
6. That's not to say Warner Brothers is completely in the right though. There is something to be said about artistic vision, and companies that show a lack of care can be unappealing to filmmakers. If the company were to keep releasing their new movies on HBO Max the same day as in theatres, I would say that Warner Brothers is in the wrong, but they announced that after 2021, their movies would be released primarily in theatres. This doesn't mean that Warner Brothers has an amazing admiration for the art form, they are still just another company trying to make as much money as possible. This does mean that there is greater hope for the longevity of the movie theatre industry.

7. This Warner Brothers controversy shows how Covid makes the battle between the movie theatre industry and streaming services even more prominent than it ever was. Ayanbadejo states that “The market for consumer attention is becoming saturated, with the option to focus on radio, the internet, music, TV, movies, and sports at any time. While also being surrounded by devices with the ability to do all of the above from devices from small 6-inch iPhone screens, to 70-inch 4k flat-screen TVs with a wide range in between” (6), which is an accurate statement as to why the theatre industry was starting to not do as well. The everyday person has access to a phone and an internet connection. They have the option to watch new movies literally at their fingertips. It’s a perfect example of when simplicity trumps quality. Before the pandemic, there was already a rise in popular movies going directly to streaming services. The difference between these projects and movies such as the aforementioned Trolls World Tour is that movies going directly to streaming services were made specifically for that service, by that service.
8. This effect on movie theatres is effectively laid out in Steve Challogan’s “Cinema in the Age of Covid”, which takes a deeper look at the past, present, and future of movie theatres. Challogan effectively summarizes this battle saying, “Streamers such as Netflix and Amazon are no longer ‘disruptors’, as they were commonly called less than two years ago, but mainstream players - much like the studios of Hollywood’s golden age” (42) While yes, streaming movies rather than going to the theatre to watch them hurt the movie theatre industry, but how harmful is this to the cinematic experience? The quality of the projects Netflix puts out can be even better than theatrical releases. Challogan notes that “Netflix alone has signed talented filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese, David Fincher, Alfonso Cuarón, Spike Lee, Nicole Holofcener, Damien Chazelle, Bong Joon-ho...” (45) and continues to mention even more of the best directors working today. This establishes that the quality of storytelling in streaming services holds up. But what about the movie theatre experience? Well, it looks like Netflix might have that covered too, or at least are working on it. According to Challogan, Netflix has bought movie theatres, most notably buying the famous Egyptian Theatre in California and premiering their movies there. It isn’t enough to make streaming services come out

on top, but it's a step in that direction, and Covid may have just advanced streaming services in this battle, both with consumers and producers.

9. To explore this idea, we can look at a movie that went through production hell: *No Time to Die* by Cary Joji Fukunaga. This is the latest James Bond movie, a massively popular property. It was originally supposed to release in November of 2019 but didn't release until almost two years later. At the start of its misfortune, it was pushed back due to normal movie issues such as director changes and injuries. Covid's impact forced the movie to be pushed back even further, and due to costs from distribution, advertising, interest, reshoots, and MGM's desire to have fifty percent of ticket sales, the movie now has to make at least 900 million dollars at the box office to even break even. It never went to a streaming service, and as a result, lost momentum and money. Compare this to a movie such as *Dune* by Denis Villeneuve. While Villeneuve wasn't a fan of the HBO Max situation at the beginning, he's had a change of tone. At the New York Film Festival, Villeneuve made a statement before the screening of his movie, and Inverse reported that he said the delay of his movie wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It gave him time, with Villeneuve saying, "Instead of running, we walked to finish the movie, which I truly appreciate because I was able to make sure the ideas had deep roots." *Dune* was released in theatres and on HBO Max and is critically acclaimed and already has a sequel in the works. *Dune* was handled with more care and was more of a success than *No Time to Die*, and streaming played a major part in that success. It helped more people see the movie and helped the production as well. (Kleinman, Fuge)
10. At the end of the day though, the production and distribution aspect is only half the story. None of their decisions would have mattered if it wasn't for consumers and their reactions to this pandemic.
11. When examining the consumer side of the film industry, I always turn to Chris Stuckmann. He's is a filmmaker on YouTube that I've been watching since I was in the eighth grade. He reviews movies when they release, and I've always trusted him with critique and recommendations. I've always seen Stuckmann as an accurate representation of the general public's opinions on the different

areas of popular culture he covers. When the HBO Max and Warner Brothers deal occurred, he made a video titled “Everything is Changing and I Have Thoughts”, which covers the state of film and what could happen in the future. Stuckmann stresses reliability. When talking about the normalcy of a new movie in theatres every Friday, he says, “That was consistency you could count on, it was always the same, and it was comforting. It was a routine. Now it’s different” (Stuckmann 7:15 - 7:23). This is a sentiment that I can easily identify with. It’s one of the many routines that Covid messed up, and while it affects some more than others, it still halts a large part of our culture. Stuckmann offers a more personal contribution to the idea of the “right way” to view this art form. He discusses memorability, and how viewing movies in theatres can leave more of a lasting impact than a movie viewed on a streaming service, highlighting the importance of keeping movies in theatres. But when looking at a more general audience who doesn’t have the same passion for this art form, do they care about the right way to view a movie? What do they care about in terms of entertainment, especially in the middle of a pandemic?

12. This pandemic showed a rise in dependence on ICT. ICT stands for information and communication technology and is what most people stuck at home turned to. Using ICT was the only way I stayed sane. Almost every day, I was interacting with some sort of technology that had some sort of narrative. It made me feel connected to stories and experiences to help forget what was happening in the outside world. Watching sitcoms like *Frasier* made me laugh, playing video games like *The Last of Us* made me cry, and watching movies like *Spirited Away* made me realize that there is happiness to be found in the darkest of times.
13. That being said, there are clear pros and cons to this technology, shown in “Preventing problematic internet use during the COVID-19 pandemic: Consensus guidance”, an article by Orsolya Kiraly et al. Before the pandemic, ICT usage was a staple in everyday life, but with nothing else to do, the pandemic heightened this use. That had the potential to be dangerous. As Kiraly describes, “While considered healthy when pursued in moderation and for meaningful purposes, excessive engagement in specific online activities such as ... may lead to severe problems and elevate risk of disordered or addictive use.” (2) I experienced this to a degree. As much as I liked



getting sucked into whatever world was presented to me through the internet, at a point, I realized that it wasn't enough. I was still addicted since there wasn't anything else to do, and unfortunately, I feel as though my experience is one many people can relate to.

14. Narrowing it down a bit, let's restrict ICT to movies and TV. The assumption that these mediums are used as coping mechanisms or distractions is fair. It makes sense that during a time of such stress and uncertainty, getting lost in another world and story can be comforting. To find real trends and support for how people are reacting to the pandemic through the things they choose to distract themselves with, a team of psychologists at Columbia University conducted an experiment reported in their empirical report "Psychotherapists' preferences for television and movies during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic". This report surveyed 186 psychotherapists, asking them about the movies and TV shows they'd watched during the pandemic. The top genres were comedy, drama, and the news, while sports, horror, and reality TV were the least viewed. This makes total sense. Comedy and drama are clear distractions from reality since they can suck a viewer in and present a story that either invests them or makes them laugh. The news was also popular since everybody wanted to know any update on the pandemic. Sports weren't happening and horror is the opposite of comfort, so it makes sense as to why those two were so low in this survey. What stands out from this survey, and what may be the most important takeaway, is the unpopularity of reality TV. It supports the idea that this medium is used as a distraction, which is why the general public may not care as much about the right way to view this art. As long as they view it, are distracted, and feel better, they are satisfied.
15. Let's dig even deeper into this reasoning. People were afraid during the height of the pandemic, so they distract themselves with a rise in movie and TV viewership. The pandemic also showed a rise in mental health issues. I had no serious mental health issues, but loneliness was present in my life more than it ever had been. As an extrovert, the sudden lack of contact with others was shocking, especially after experiencing the closeness of the movie group I had. Even though there is a danger in too much exposure to ICT's, their contributions can be extremely helpful. At a time like a pandemic, people can relate to movies like I am Legend and The Shawshank

Redemption as they examine loneliness. It can help a person to see issues they may be dealing with portrayed in media. It creates a sense of community and as a result a sense of comfort, a voice telling them “you are not alone in feeling this way”. That’s one of the many beautiful contributions from the world of film. (Blasco)

16. Movies are built into our culture. We reference movies daily, we look forward to them, we use them as escapes, and we relate to them. The uncertainty of new additions to this culture was frightening when the pandemic hit. A new movie in a theatre was an example of normality that had disappeared. But now, as we see a decline in Covid and a rise of new movies, we begin a slow crawl back to a sense of normalcy. I hope to once again regain that feeling of community around this art form. This end of this pandemic comes with a new appreciation for movies, and I’m ready to explore.



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