



Symbolic Metaphors of Film Epidemic Narratives: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Foreign Epidemic Disaster Films

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Abstract

Epidemic disaster films take epidemics as the core of their narratives and involve a symbolic system with multiple metaphorical meanings. This study focuses on analysing 45 epidemic disaster films from China, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US. It is found that the medical symbols in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films that best characterise the epidemic narrative have referential meanings related to three main aspects, namely the occurrence of epidemics, the treatment of epidemics, and the public health system. Their direct and derived meanings provide cognitive information about mass infectious epidemics and methods of treatment and prevention. By integrating medical and non-medical symbols in the films, social and cultural symbols rich in metaphorical meanings are formed. "Tracing the origin of disease" involves a cultural metaphor that goes beyond medicine; "Responding to the crisis" involves a political metaphor of quarantine, rescue, and destruction; and "Rescue from the disaster" involves the human nature related metaphor of dilemma. Comparatively, the medical symbols and metaphors of epidemics in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films have more similarities than differences, while the socio-cultural symbols and their metaphors have more differences than similarities.

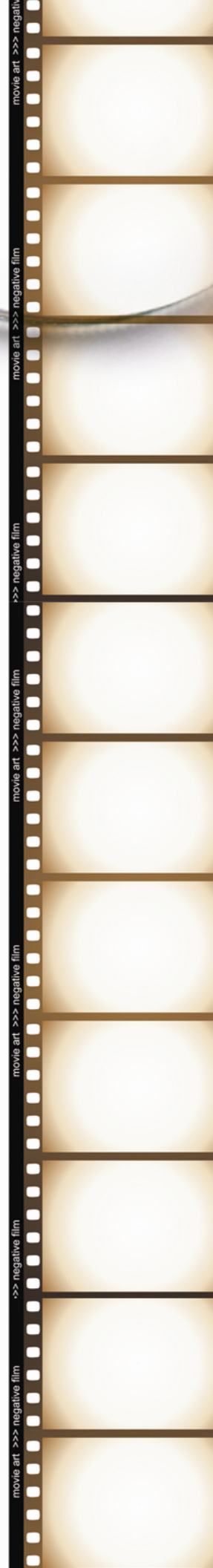
Keywords: epidemic disaster film; epidemic narrative; semiotics; metaphor; medical symbol; socio-cultural symbol; comparative study



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Symbolic Metaphors of Film Epidemic Narratives¹: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Foreign Epidemic Disaster Films

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Introduction

Epidemics have long been associated with human history. The large-scale epidemics of bubonic plague, cholera, smallpox, influenza, Ebola, AIDS, atypical pneumonia, and COVID-19 have left behind indelible memories of historical trauma and pain. Since the invention of cinema, epidemics have been a common subject in film narratives. Such films include, for example, the British, Italian, and German co-production *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976, directed by George P. Cosmatos), the American film *Outbreak* (1995, directed by Wolfgang Petersen), the Japanese film *Pandemic* (2009, directed by Takahisa Zeze), the American film *Contagion* (2011, directed by Steven Soderbergh), the South Korean film *The Flu* (2013, directed by Sung-su Kim), among others. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has again set off a wave of interest and research into epidemic films. Chinese academia has referred to such films as “virus films”, “epidemic disaster films”, “infection disaster films”, “plague films”, and so on. Although these names may signify different aspects, they all refer to films based on real or imagined large-scale infectious epidemics and the disasters they cause, and are regarded

as a subgenre of disaster films. In this paper, we believe that it is more appropriate to call films that focus on epidemic narratives “epidemic disaster films”.

In the course of their formation and development, epidemic disaster films have gradually developed a symbolic metaphorical system that is different from other disaster films that take natural disasters, air crashes, world wars, and others as their narrative themes. Through this system, the audience is not only watching a story about the spread of a virus, but shall also be able to understand the significance it conveys for society, culture, economy, or politics. In this regard, we conduct a comparative study to explore the similarities and differences between the symbolic metaphors of Chinese epidemic disaster films and those of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US. We take the Chinese film *Chinese Doctors* (2021, directed by Andrew Lau), *The Cassandra Crossing*, *Pandemic*, *Contagion*, and *The Flu* as the main examples for our comparative analysis. Our goal is to provide explanations of and some useful perspectives on this comparison.

Semiotics and Metaphors

Modern semiotics, the study of signs and sign-using behaviour, began with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure (1916) regarded language as a symbolic system for expressing ideas in his *Course in General Linguistics*, and put forward a series of far-reaching semiotic concepts, such as langue

/ parole, signifier / signified, synchronous / diachronous, and syntagmatic relations / associative relations. In the same period, Peirce (1906) proposed the triadic model of representamen / object / interpretant, and his icon/index/symbol concept had a major influence on film semiotics. Since then, Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Umberto Eco, Paolo Bertetti, and others have continued to advance the study of semiotics based on the theories of Saussure and Peirce, and have applied semiotics to the field of non-linguistics.

The study of metaphor began with Aristotle and Plato in ancient Greece, with the former studying it from a rhetorical perspective and the latter from a philosophical perspective. Metaphor is now an interdisciplinary research subject and a multidimensional phenomenon, and has been examined from the perspectives of rhetoric, linguistics, philosophy, semiotics, cognitive psychology, and hermeneutics, resulting in a rich and complex theory of metaphor. Linguistics, semiotics, and metaphor theory in film studies were first combined under Russian formalism.

Issues such as symbolic composition and metaphor in film were first discussed by researchers such as the Russian formalist theorist Boris Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum while cinema was still in its infancy. The core of his examination of semiotics in cinema was about ideograms and metaphors. Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynyarov also regarded cinema as a

special symbolic system and provided seminal explanations of synecdoche and metonymy in film metaphors (see Eikhenbaum's (1927) *Problems of Film Stylistics*, Jakobson's (1927) *Is Cinema in Decline?*, and Tynyarov's (1927) *On the Fundamentals of Cinema*). Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Umberto Eco, Peter Warren, and others had since developed their own theories of film semiotics and metaphors. Barthes (1972) first applied Saussure's semiotic theory to analyse socio-cultural phenomena in his book *Mythologies*, and Metz (1974) published *The Cinema: Language or Language System?* Film semiotics had then become an important area of film theory. Film, as a metaphorical art form, is now widely recognised as having its own unique semiotic system. Although the theories of film semiotics and its metaphors are not identical or contradictory, they represent important theoretical resources and conceptual tools for the study and criticism of epidemic disaster cinema. The American scholar Susan Sontag's (1990) *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* is also a frequently cited theoretical reference.

Influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, "disease metaphors" in film narratives have become a hot topic in Chinese film studies and criticism. They can be divided into two categories according to the types of film studies. One category focuses on disease metaphors in non-disaster films, such as Zhang's (2022) *Speculation and Transcendence of Taboo: A Study on the Creation of Chinese Cancer Cinemas*, in which cancer and its metaphors of "death

anxiety” and “social cancer” in films such as *Go away Mr Tumour* are discussed. In the many studies in this category, the common thread is to consider certain diseases in film narratives as metaphors and to explore the cultural or ideological significance of these metaphors. The other category focuses on the epidemic metaphors in epidemic disaster films as the object of research. This literature is limited, but is closely related to the issue we examine in this paper, so we now present a brief review of representative studies.

In *Towards Death: Analysis of Infectious Disease Disaster Films*, Yin (2020) does not further discuss the symbolic metaphor of “infectious disease disaster films” he defines. However, he suggests that the characteristics of these films that distinguish them from general disease narrative films are “immensity”, “publicity”, and “globality”. These are useful for determining the connotations and extensions of the concept of epidemic disaster films. In *The Metaphor of Epidemic in the Age of Globalization: The Culture and Ideology of Virus Film*, Qin (2020) refers to “virus”, “patient zero”, “quarantine”, and “apocalyptic landscapes”, in what she defines as viral films, both domestic and foreign. She argues that these metaphors all have specific cultural and ideological significance, and that they refer to the prevalence of prejudice and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and so on. In *Metaphors of Disease and Weapons of the Weak – ‘Ecological Crisis’ in Plague Cinema*, Zeng (2020) regards the

“viruses” and various “scenes”, “zombies”, and the narrative fragments with symbolic meanings in what he defines as “plague films” as metaphors, and analyses the “modernity discourse” and “ecological crisis” they imply. In *Difference and Repetition: A Comparison of American and Korean Epidemic Films: Taking American Film ‘Contagion’ and Korean Film ‘The Flu’ as an Example*, Fu (2020) analyses the disaster symbols that appear repeatedly in American and Korean “epidemic cinema”, as he defines it. The article involves a generalised narrative semiotic analysis method, without any explicit mention of film metaphor. Several other representative papers focus on metaphor identification and meaning interpretation, without conducting any symbolic analysis.

The aim of the above studies is not to construct or develop a new theory of film metaphor, but to identify and interpret the meaning of metaphors in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films by applying established semiotic or metaphorical theories to the analyses. According to their metaphorical meanings and functions, the disaster symbols in the films can be classified as “popularising virus knowledge”, “destroying city symbols”, “criticising news media”, “exploring the virtues and vices”, and “sewing the past and the future”, and each category is then comparatively analysed in terms of its specific meaning. Our current study focuses on analysing and comparing Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films that have had a major impact in China. Their symbols and coding methods that differ from those of non-epidemic

disaster films are analysed, the metaphors identified, and these are compared to reveal their similarities and differences.

Methodology

Epidemic disaster films deal with the devastation caused by acute epidemics in infected areas and in people, which have the hallmarks of “immensity”, “publicity”, and “globality”. These are not found in non-epidemic disaster films such as *Go away Mr Tumour*. The number of Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films produced is extensive, and many are excellent. We aim to provide an overview and thus only select representative epidemic disaster films for our analysis and research. We consider four main criteria when selecting films: first, they have been shown in cinemas, on TV, or on the Internet in mainland China; second, they have received extensive attention in mainland China, in terms of articles published by Chinese film academics and critics, box office success, and Douban and IMDb ratings; third, they have status and influence in the history of the epidemic disaster film genre; and fourth, the selected Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films are comparable. Table 1 provides the basic information about the 45 films selected for analysis in this study.

Country	Film	Director	Release Date	Box Office (Global,	Douban Rating	IMDb Rating
UK	Dr Wise on Influenza	James Niven	1919	/	/	6.1 tt12849824
Germany	Pest in Florenz	Otto Rippert	1919	/	/	6.4 tt0010559
US	Night of the Living Dead	George A. Romero	1968	0.24M	7.4	7.8 tt0063350
US	The Crazies	George A. Romero	1973	/	6.6	6.1 tt0069895
Italy/ Germany/ UK	The Cassandra Crossing	George P. Cosmatos	1976	/	8.3	6.3 tt0074292
US	Philadelphia	Jonathan Demme	1993	206.68M	8.7	7.7 tt0107818
US	Outbreak	Wolfgang Petersen	1995	189.86M	7.7	6.6 tt0114069
China	Bio Zombie	Wilson Yip	1998	/	6.7	6.4 tt0277605
US	Resident Evil	Paul W. S. Anderson	2002	102.98M	8.3	6.6 tt0120804
UK	28 Days Later	Danny Boyle	2002	84.66M	7.2	7.5 tt0289043
China	SARS	Wai-man Cheng	2003	0.025M	5.2	5.2 tt0414977
China	38 Degrees	Xin Liu	2003	/	6.4	6.3 tt0453204
US	The Most Dangerous Woman in America	Nancy Porter	2004	/	/	7.8 tt0662644
US/China/ Canada	The Painted Veil	John Curran	2006	26.91M	8.3	7.4 tt0446755
US/	The Invasion	Oliver Hirschbiegel	2007	40.17M	6.6	5.9 tt0427392
US	I Am Legend	Francis Lawrence	2007	585.41M	8.2	7.2 tt0480249
US	The Andromeda Strain	Mikael Salomon	2008	/	6.7	6.1 tt0424600
US	The Happening	M Night Shyamalan	2008	163.40M	6.1	5.0 tt0949731
US	Doomsday	Neil Marshall	2008	22.47M	6.1	5.9 tt0483607
US	Zombieland	Ruben Fleischer	2009	102.39M	7.3	7.6 tt1156398
US	Carriers	Alex Pastor/ David Pastor	2009	5.81M	6.3	6.0 tt0806203
US/ Canada	The Thaw	Mark A. Lewis	2009	0.15M	6.2	5.2 tt1235448
Japan	Pandemic	Takahisa Zeze	2009	20.71M	6.4	5.3 tt1185654
Germany/ UK	Black Death	Christopher Smith	2010	0.38M	6.3	6.4 tt1181791

US	Contagion	Steven Soderbergh	2011	136.51M	7.1	6.8 tt1598778
China	Love for Life	Chang-wei Gu	2011	0.15M	7.4	6.4 tt1664704
US	Dallas Buyers Club	Jean-Marc Vallee	2013	55.20M	8.8	7.9 tt0790636
China	Fall of Ming	Jing Wang	2013	0.46M	8.2	7.2 tt3336934
South Korea	The Flu	Sung-su Kim	2013	19.77M	7.8	6.6 tt2351310
China	Variation in Crisis	Hai Zhong	2014	/	2.6	/
US	Hidden	Matt Duffer/ Ross Duffer	2015	/	6.8	6.4 tt2131532
South Korea	Train to Busan	Sang-ho Yeon	2016	92.76M	8.6	7.6 tt5700672
US	Viral	Henry Joost/ Ariel	2016	0.55M	4.8	5.5 tt2597892
China	Sang Shi Zhi Mu	Han-wen Zhang	2016	/	/	/
US	Patient Zero	Stefan Ruzowitzky	2018	/	4.7	4.6 tt3458254
UK	The Flu That Killed 50	Andrew Thompson	2018	/	8.2	7.1 tt9070904
China	The Revenge of Plant	Huang Huang	2018	/	5.2	/
China	Zui Mei Ni Xing	Yu-lin Fan/Bo Xing /Shu-hua Hu	2020	/	/	/
US	Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak	Doug Shultz	2020	/	7.8	6.4 tt11497904
China	A Record of 80 Days in Jinyintan Hospital	Yan Nie/ Yi-ming Song/ Hai-yan Tan/Qin Wu	2020	/	8.9	6.4 tt13801136
China	Dong Qu Chun Gui	Cheng-ye Kang	2020	/	7.6	/
China	Life Matters – Covid	Shi-guang Fan	2020	/	9.3	/ tt16492748
China	Chinese Doctors	Andrew Lau	2021	197.1M	6.9	4.7 tt13696296
China	Days and Nights in Wuhan	Jing-lin Cao	2021	/	7.5	5.9 tt13788574
China	The Uprise	Le Yang	2023	/	/	/

Table 1: Epidemic disaster films selected for analysis in this study. (The films in this table are sorted in chronological order without considering other factors. ‘/’ indicates that related information is missing.)

From a stylistic point of view, the films in Table 1 belong to three main genres: realistic, documentary, and fantasy. In the realistic genre of epidemic disaster films, most of the content is based on history or reality, such as the German film *Pest in Florenz* (1919, directed by Otto Rippert), which is based on Edgar Allan Poe's *King Pest* and refers to the historical event of the plague striking Florence in the Middle Ages. The American film *Outbreak* is based on the real-life events of 1989, when the Ebola virus was brought into the US by imported animals and almost caused a major crisis. The Japanese film *Pandemic* is based on the real-life Bird Flu outbreak. The South Korean film *The Flu* is based on the real-life events of SARS and Bird Flu. The Chinese film *Chinese Doctors* is based on the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2020. Most of these epidemic disaster films adopt a realistic approach to recount the occurrence, prevalence, and eventual containment of acute infectious diseases of unknown origin. Taking the epidemic as the core of the narrative, designing character relationships around the crisis, and adopting a two- or multi-stranded intertwined approach to advance the plot are the dominant forms of their stylistic structure. These types of films represent the first choice for analysis in this paper. The Chinese film *Love for Life* (2011, directed by Chang-wei Gu), the American film *Philadelphia* (1993, directed by Jonathan Demme), and the co-production between the US, China, and Canada *The Painted Veil* (2006, directed by John Curran) all have infectious diseases as the backdrop of the story. Their narratives focus on the emotional lives of individual

patients after contracting the disease, their experiences, and their struggle against the discrimination and injustice they suffered, which represents a normative deviation from the realistic form of narrative.

The documentary genre of epidemic disaster films is a stylistic form that focuses on the factual recording of historical or real-life epidemic events. For example, the British film *The Flu That Killed 50 Million* (2018, directed by Andrew Thompson), the American film *The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (2004, directed by Nancy Porter), and the Chinese film *Days and Nights in Wuhan* (2021, directed by Jin-ling Cao) are documentaries in nature. The two narrative forms involved are factual recording and acting. Factual recording refers to filming on location and using the camera to record what is happening, and then creating the film and its structure through editing, combining, and reconstructing, according to the intention to be expressed. Unlike a live recording, acting refers to re-enactments by actors based on actual events, or a narrative interpretation based on facts. The symbolic metaphors of both forms are particularly worthy of analysis.

Relatively few epidemic disaster films in the fantasy genre are produced in China compared with Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US. The fantasy genre can be divided into science fiction and fantasy. On the one hand, epidemic disaster films with a sci-fi style, such as

The Revenge of Plant (2018, directed by Huang Huang), *The Andromeda Strain* (2008, directed by Mikael Salomon), and *The Happening* (2008, directed by M. Night Shyamalan), are fantasies about ecology, biomedicine, biochemical weapons, and the exploration of extra-terrestrial life based on scientific theories. Most of them feature doctors, scientists, professionals, or technicians as protagonists, and their symbolic metaphors are mainly related to modern science and technology and the critique of human nature. On the other hand, fantasy epidemic disaster films mainly combine thriller and horror genres and involve zombies, such as the US films *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, directed by George A. Romero), *The Crazies* (1973, directed by George A. Romero), *Resident Evil* (2002, directed by Paul W. S. Anderson), *Doomsday* (2008, directed by Neil Marshall), *Zombieland* (2009, directed by Ruben Fleischer), *Carriers* (2009, directed by Alex Pastor and David Pastor), *Patient Zero* (2018, directed by Stefan Ruzowitzky); the British film *28 Days Later* (2002, directed by Danny Boyle); the South Korean film *Train to Busan* (2016, directed by Sang-ho Yeon); and the Chinese films *Bio Zombie* (1998, directed by Wilson Yip), and *Sang Shi Zhi Mu* (2016, directed by Han-wen Zhang). The narrative focus of these films is not the disaster brought by the epidemic to human beings, but the thrilling and horrifying images and action scenes caused by the virus. The aim is to provide strong sensory stimulation to the audience to achieve their intended commercial purpose.

The realistic, documentary, and fantasy genres of epidemic disaster films have all developed their own distinctive symbolic systems and metaphors. The focus of this study is not to analyse the differences between these three genres, but to assess the medical and socio-cultural symbols and metaphors, which are common to all types of genres of epidemic disaster films, and also to conduct a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences in symbols and metaphors between Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) presents a three-dimensional framework of signifiers, signified, and symbols in myth. Based on that, in *Reading Television*, Fiske and Hartley (2003) propose three orders of meaning of the symbolic representation system. The first is the self-contained construct, the second relates to the socio-cultural context in which the symbols are embedded, and:

...the range of cultural meanings that are generated in this second order cohere in the third order of signification into a comprehensive, cultural picture of the world, a coherent and organized view of the reality with which we are faced (p. 25).

In this study, we are concerned with the second and third orders of meaning of cinematic symbols. We first discuss the direct and derived meanings of medical symbols and then examine the rich cultural, human, and political metaphors of the socio-cultural symbols that are formed when medical and non-medical symbols are integrated. Table 2 outlines our framework of analysis.

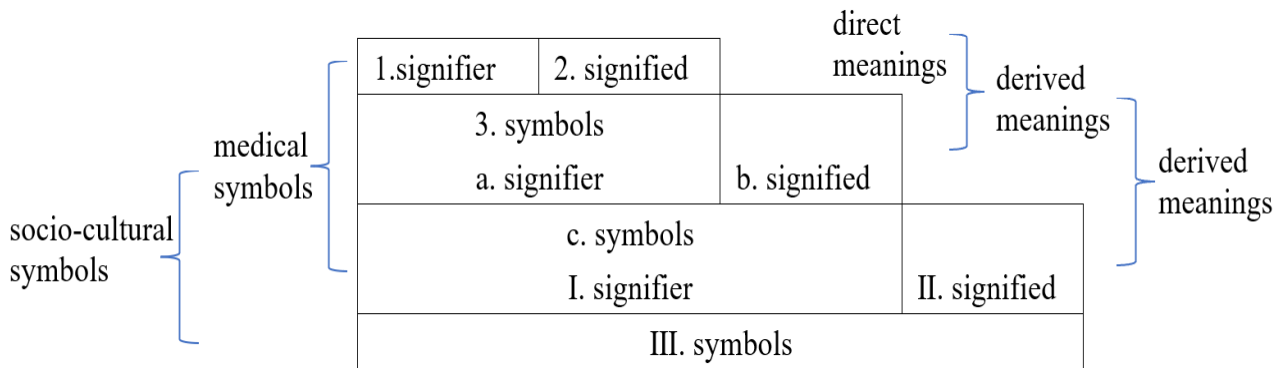


Table 2: Framework of analysis.

Medical Symbols and Metaphors in Film Epidemic Narratives

The epidemic narrative texts of films form a symbolic system with multiple metaphorical meanings. Analysing the selected films reveals that medical symbols are the primary and essential features of epidemic narratives. In Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films, these medical symbols mainly refer to three aspects: the epidemic, the epidemic treatment, and the public health system. The same questions are typically addressed in the narratives of epidemic films, enabling the encoding and decoding of these series of symbols: What kind of infectious disease is prevalent? Where does it come from? How is it spread? How is it treated and defeated? The metaphorical references represent the answers to these questions.

Epidemic Symbols and Metaphors

In the film epidemic narratives, the symptoms, etiological pathology, and source of the infectious disease along with its means of transmission, public health effects, and epidemic

prevention, are all accompanied by corresponding symbols, modes of symbolic encoding, and metaphors drawn from the medical sciences. In most cases, the audience's attention is initially attracted by the various symptoms of infected patients, which are more or less the same in Chinese and foreign films. For example, the patients in *Chinese Doctors* suffer from fever, coughing, difficulty breathing, nasal congestion, sore throat, muscle pain, abdominal pain, and diarrhoea after being infected with the COVID-19 virus. Those in *Contagion* present with flushing, muscle weakness, and yellow foaming at the mouth after being infected with the unknown virus. The patient in *Outbreak*, infected with the Ebola virus and its new variants, presents with persistently high fever, headache, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, and haemorrhage. Patients infected with bubonic plague in *Black Death* (2010, directed by Christopher Smith) experience chills, high fever, shortness of breath, severe coughing, vomiting, diarrhoea, and shock.

These “audible” and “visible” symptoms are signs through which doctors conduct their diagnoses and are also effective audio-visual elements that film directors use to represent infectious diseases. In terms of film semiotics, these audio-visual elements are “resemblance” symbols (also known as iconic symbols or indicator symbols) that serve as the signifiers, and the diseases they symbolise are the signified. When a new infectious disease breaks out, its

audible and visible symptoms are “understandable”, but it is often not clear what type of disease it is. For example, in *Contagion*, patient zero Beth Emhoff is infected with a new and unknown virus, and her husband guesses that it is a cold, while her doctor thinks it might be epilepsy, drug addiction, or encephalitis, but cannot provide effective treatment, and she quickly dies. Her son Clark is later infected, but is also misdiagnosed by doctors who think he has a cold, leading to his death. To determine the real disease and its aetiology, doctors and scientists must conduct experimental research, which is the key point when setting up the suspense of the film and the logical driving force that advances the narrative.

The causes and pathologies of infectious diseases are hidden behind a variety of audible and visible symptoms. From these, doctors and medical scientists can analyse the “invisible” causes of disease, while film directors must convert the invisible causes into audible sound symbols and visible image symbols through these symptoms. For example, the documentary film *The Flu That Killed 50 Million* talks about the Spanish flu that spread globally in 1918 and caused 50 million deaths. The film uses many shots to show the symptoms of infected patients: coughing, sputum, haemoptysis, the lips and ears of the corpses turning blue, etc. These visible symptoms act as signifiers, which are metaphors for the flu. The audience, like the characters in the play, can interpret the signified as influenza, but cannot further determine its aetiology. As Professor Wendy Barclay of Imperial College, the interviewee in the play, says, “Scientists

couldn't figure out what was causing the illness, and were inclined to think it was caused by a bacterium called *Haemophilus influenzae*.” However, the real culprit was a virus, 1,000 times smaller than bacteria, and “people at that time didn't quite know what a virus was, and they didn't have the necessary technology or research tools, so they had to just blindly take their chances.” In line with the authoritative words of Professor Barclay's narration, two sets of footage appear in the film: one is of scientists in 1918–1919 conducting bacterial culture experiments in the laboratory and seeing only bacteria but not viruses in the microscope, which is used as a metaphor for the wrong perception of the cause of the disease at that time; and the other is the microscopic image of the virus seen by Professor Barclay using a new type of experimental equipment, which is used as a metaphor for the real cause of influenza. At this point, the film's coding sequence of the epidemic disease symbol can be summarised as follows: symptoms of the epidemic (images of coughing, haemoptysis, bluish lips and ears of corpses, etc.) — the epidemic (the Spanish flu) — the cause of the disease (bacterial micrographs/virus micrographs), as shown in Figures 1–4. Chinese and foreign films, such as *Chinese Doctors*, *Contagion*, and *The Flu That Killed 50 Million*, mainly use the coding sequence of epidemic disease symbols from symptom to cause.



Figure 1: *The Flu That Killed 50 Million*.
Haemoptysis of the patient.



Figure 2: *The Flu That Killed 50 Million*.
The lips and ears of the corpse turn blue.

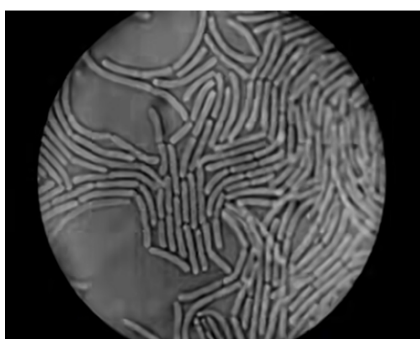


Figure 3: *The Flu That Killed 50 Million*. The bacteria's micrograph.

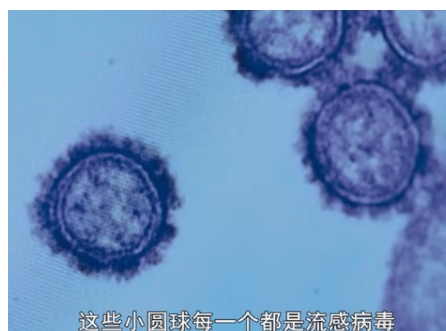


Figure 4: *The Flu That Killed 50 Million*.
The virus' micrograph.

The tracing of the source of an infectious disease is an integral part of a film's epidemic narrative, with corresponding audio-visual symbols and coding sequences. For example, in *Contagion*, the source of the contagion is a virus carried by bats in the forests of Southeast Asia and transmitted to pigs fed by humans. The source of the infectious disease in *The Cassandra Crossing* is the pulmonary pestis virus developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) laboratory, which is contaminated by terrorists in the course of a robbery. The film begins with close-up footage and the virus vials are accidentally hit by the laboratory guards, and the liquid

with the virus is spilled onto two terrorists (Figure 5). One terrorist is injured and arrested, and the other escapes and becomes “patient zero”. The source of the contagion in *Outbreak* is the Motaba virus and its new variants brought to the US by an African monkey (Figure 6), the hunt for which becomes an important narrative thread. The source of the contagion in *The Andromeda Strain* is the Andromeda virus, which is of extra-terrestrial origin and is brought to Earth by a crashed space shuttle. Each of these films uses one or more sequences of footage edited together to form a relatively complete phrase to refer to the source of the epidemic. Chinese epidemic disaster films, with the exception of a few such as *Fall of Ming* (2013, directed by Jing Wang) and *The Revenge of Plant* (2018, directed by Huang Huang), are less concerned with the source of infectious diseases, and most of the relevant ideograms are missing.



Figure 5: *The Cassandra Crossing*. The liquid with the virus is spilled onto two terrorists.

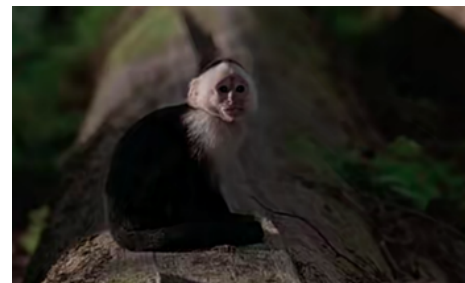


Figure 6: *Outbreak*. An African monkey carrying the virus is abandoned in a forest in the US.

The transmission routes of infectious diseases and the epidemiological investigations of “patient zero” and those infected are also integral to the film’s epidemic narrative, with

corresponding audio-visual symbols and coding sequences. Infectious diseases can be transmitted in many ways, such as through droplets, the digestive tract, contact, insects, and blood and body fluids. These transmission routes have a direct impact on interactions between people, between people and society, and between people and nature. For example, the source of the infectious disease in *Contagion* is the virus carried by bats. Its transmission is mainly through the digestive tract and contact, and as the infected person touches all kinds of objects and people, they become the infectious medium. The end of the film, “Day 1”, offers a montage of the spread of the virus: Amm Edson’s logging machine pushes down a tree in a forest in Southeast Asia – frightened bats fly away from the tree – a bat flies into a banana tree and bites a banana – the bat flies into a pig farm and spits out the banana – a pig eats the banana spat out by the bat – the pig that ate the banana is slaughtered and sold to a Hong Kong hotel – a hotel chef processes the slaughtered pig – a virus-infected chef shakes hands with the heroine – the virus-infected heroine meets her friends for dinner at a hotel – the virus-infected heroine goes to a Macau casino – the virus-infected heroine returns to the US, from where the virus spreads rapidly around the world (Figure 7–16). The footage appears to be documentary, but in fact it is mimetic, with a high degree of falsification. The simulated images and sounds have a strong likeness to reality, but their metaphorical meaning is not the direct meaning of the resemblance symbols but their derived meaning; that is, the resemblance symbols are used to symbolically

represent the source of the virus, its transmission route, the medium of contagion, and the process of transmission. Their symbolic coding rules represent the causal law of virus transmission.



Figure 7: Contagion. A logging machine pushes down a tree.



Figure 8: Contagion. Frightened bats fly away from the tree.



Figure 9: Contagion. A bat flies into a banana tree and bites a banana.



Figure 10: Contagion. The bat flies into a pig farm and spits out the banana.



Figure 11: Contagion. A pig eats the banana spat out by the bat.



Figure 12: Contagion. The pig is slaughtered and sold in Hong Kong.



Figure 13: Contagion. The infected chef shakes hands with the heroine.

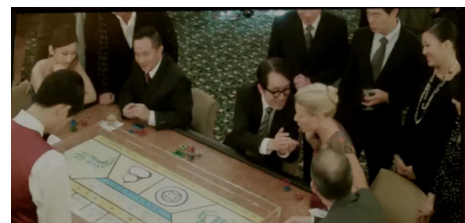


Figure 14: Contagion. The infected heroine goes to a Macau casino.



Figure 15: Contagion. The infected heroine returns to the US.



Figure 16: Contagion. The infected heroine falls sick.

Comparatively, most American, European, Japanese, and Korean epidemic disaster films give considerable narrative space to the transmission pathways of infectious diseases and the flow of “patient zero” and the infected, while Chinese films give less narrative space to that.

Epidemic Treatment Symbols and Metaphors

In the epidemic narrative of films, content regarding epidemic treatment is central. The objects and dynamic scenes used to represent epidemic treatment in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films include hospitals, doctors, nurses, masks, protective suits, medical equipment, medicines, hospital beds, patients, first aid scenes, surgical scenes, and scenes of discussion of medical plans. These can be realistic or documentary in nature and are metaphors for the audio-visual symbols that refer to the treatment of epidemics. Due to their resemblance, the audience understands the direct meaning of these audible and visible symbols, and the direct meaning of some symbols will shift to the derived meaning in the specific coding procedure, which then has a symbolic meaning.

Chinese Doctors is based on the real events of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and most of the characters in the film, such as Zhang Ding-yu, have real-life prototypes. The film contains images and sounds of the building of the Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, the respirators and oxygen cylinders used to treat COVID-19-infected patients, and a wide range of monitoring instruments, protective clothing, and intubation and resuscitation equipment (Figure 17). The moving images of these objects and scenes in the film are resemblance symbols of the hospital's treatment of COVID-19 virus-infected patients, and have a strong sense of realism. The symbolic text of the film is based on the development of the epidemic in the group, the development of the disease in the individual, and the specific treatment procedures of the virus, so that in the process of watching the film and in the process of decoding the symbols, the viewer can "see" and "understand" the treatment process and methods of those infected with the virus, which evoke past memories. When watching the film and decoding the symbols, the audience can hear and see and the process and methods for treating patients infected with the virus, thus awakening the experience of the epidemic disaster, and enabling them to re-understand the COVID-19 pandemic that they have themselves experienced.

The use of vaccines or serological therapies to combat and treat infectious diseases caused

by an unknown virus is the most important method in the treatment of epidemics. However, due to the lack of knowledge about a new virus at the beginning of an epidemic, finding and developing the corresponding vaccine or refining a serum containing antibodies is very difficult. The various conflicts that arise from this are common sequences in film epidemic narratives. For example, in *The Flu*, Monser, the stowaway who is “patient zero”, carries his own antibodies and is immune to the H5N1 flu virus. After finding Monser through many twists and turns, the heroine, Dr Kim In-hae, uses her blood to successfully extract a serum containing the antibody and injects it into her daughter, who has been infected with the virus, thus saving her daughter’s life and those of the quarantined residents. The symbols used to represent the serum therapy in this episode include the centrifuge used to extract the serum, the syringe containing the serum, the action of Kim In-hae injecting the serum into her daughter Mirre (Figure 18), and the gradual decline in Mirre’s symptoms. These are encoded in a sequence of symbols that complete the expression of the meaning of using serum therapy in the fight against the new influenza virus. In *Outbreak*, the serum is extracted from the blood of monkeys, which carry their own antibodies, to cure the patients. The image symbols are encoded in the same order as in *The Flu*. In *Contagion*, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) finally develops a vaccine against a new virus (MEN1). The film does not describe the process of developing the vaccine, but only uses disjointed visual symbols such as the opening of the

development apparatus and the 57th vaccine storage tube with the MEN1 label (Figure 19), and the researcher Ally Hextall injecting herself with the vaccine as an experiment (Figure 20), to indicate that the vaccine was not easy to develop and that it was a success.



Figure 17: *Chinese Doctors*. Treating COVID-19 virus-infected patients.



Figure 18: *The Flu*. Kim In-hae injecting the serum into his daughter.

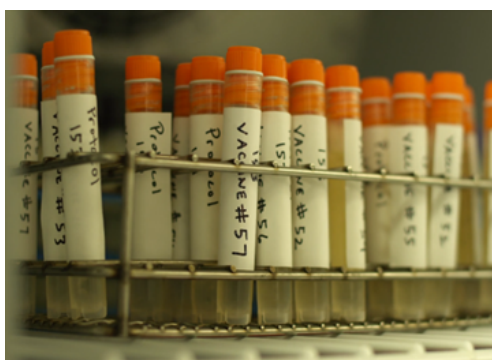


Figure 19: *Contagion*. The 57th vaccine storage tube.



Figure 20: *Contagion*. Ally Hextall injecting herself with the vaccine.

Unlike those from Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US, Chinese epidemic disaster films concentrate more on epidemic treatment in hospitals and less on serum isolation and vaccine development, which are difficult to conduct in general hospitals, and the relevant image symbols are therefore missing.

Public Health System Symbols and Metaphors

The occurrence of an epidemic disaster, whether in China or in another country, is a major public health event. Responding to public health emergencies and controlling epidemics are important functions of relevant international organisations such as the WHO and national governments and their related regulatory agencies such as the National Health Commission of China (NHC) and the CDC. Therefore, these organisations often appear in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films as important organisers and implementers of public health action. For example, in *Chinese Doctors*, the NHC shares the genome sequence information of the COVID-19 virus with the WHO (Figure 21), and the WHO sends experts to China to investigate; in *Contagion*, the WHO sends an expert, Li Qiao, to Hong Kong to conduct the epidemiological investigation; in *Pandemic*, the WHO sends Eiko Kobayashi to be the commander of the epidemiological investigation of the H5N1 disease (Figure 22) and experiment with serological treatments to help Japan fight the pandemic. The governments and related institutions are also represented in these films by officials and experts. The images of these experts are both resemblance signs and symbols. As resemblance signs, they refer to the experts themselves, and the audience understands their direct meaning; as symbols, they refer to the WHO, governments, and related institutions, and the audience understands their derived meaning, which can also be further ideologically derived.

Many means of epidemic prevention are represented in epidemic disaster films, such as epidemiological investigations, quarantine and isolation, extermination of infected areas, research into unknown infectious diseases, the development of vaccines, and serotherapy. For example, the most prominent images of epidemic prevention in *Chinese Doctors* are of a leading group set up by the CPC Central Committee who are stationed in Wuhan, the quarantine of Wuhan, and the medical teams and volunteers from the army and other parts of China who rush to support the city. The most prominent images in *Pandemic* are images of the epidemiological investigation, the seminar of the WHO and the Japanese government, the culling of sick chickens in farms (Figure 23), the army controlling the infected area, the government setting up quarantine zones, and the organisation of vaccine research. In *The Flu*, the most prominent epidemic prevention images are the sealing off of the Bundang infected area by the Korean government and the US officials in Korea, the team of specialists from medical and research institutes visiting the infected area to conduct epidemiological investigations and treat patients, the huge incinerator (Figure 24), and the US officials in Korea deploying the US Air Force to prepare for the indiscriminate bombing of the infected area and all its residents. The metaphorical significance of these images, which are both realistic and highly symbolic, lies not in their direct significance as resemblance signs, but in their ideological significance as symbols.



Figure 21: *Chinese Doctors*. NHC shares the genome sequence with the WHO.



Figure 22: *Pandemic*. Eiko Kobayashi convenes a meeting.



Figure 23: *Pandemic*. The culling of infected chickens.

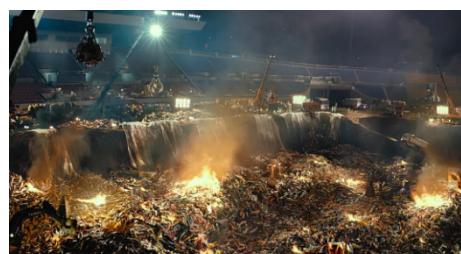


Figure 24: *The Flu*. The huge incinerator.

In the film epidemic narratives, the medical symbols and metaphors of the epidemic form a complex system with multiple series and levels, and each series and level has corresponding symbols and coding methods, whose basic requirement is to conform to medical science. In terms of genre, realistic and documentary epidemic disaster films have higher requirements for scientificity; the fantasy genre should also follow these requirements but, because of its fantasy element, the science may be too advanced or lack the necessary theories, and violating medical science knowledge is thus very common. In terms of origin, the epidemic medical symbols and their metaphors in Chinese epidemic disaster films have similarities with those of American, European, Japanese, and Korean films, in addition to the many differences mentioned above.

Socio-cultural Symbols and Metaphors in Film Epidemic Narratives

As mentioned, the medical symbols in film epidemic narratives are loaded with direct and derived meanings that first and foremost provide cognitive information about pandemics, methods of treatment, and ways of prevention. For example, the self-financed documentary film *Dr Wise on Influenza*, made by British doctor James Niven in 1918, had a very clear purpose. Its aim was to disseminate knowledge about influenza prevention among the public as the Spanish influenza was spreading globally at the time. The medical symbols of influenza in the film are loaded with metaphorical meanings of what James Niven believed to be the most accurate medical knowledge about the disease and its prevention at the time. However, as Sontag (1990) puts it, on a deeper level infectious diseases are those loaded with the most meaning, and a pandemic is treated not only as a medical event, but as a literary event, a moral event, a political event, and an economic event.

Therefore, the metaphorical significance of medical symbols in epidemic disaster films is not limited to “medical events”, as they are also integrated with non-medical symbols to point to the cultural significance of the pandemic as a literary, moral, political, and economic event, and thus will be transformed into socio-cultural symbols. The social and cultural symbols in film epidemic narratives are rich in metaphorical meanings that involve religion, politics, economy, race, gender, class, human nature, ecology, modern technology, etc. In this paper, we

focus on a few specific aspects and conduct a brief comparative analysis.

Tracing the Origin of Disease: Cultural Metaphors Go Beyond Medicine

In the reality of the public health system and epidemic prevention, tracing the origin of disease is an important part of researching infectious epidemics and responding to public health events. This must be rigorously scientific; otherwise, it will affect the correct understanding of new infections. In epidemic disaster films, the narrative symbols' metaphorical significance of tracing the source of a disease is sometimes outside of the medical realm. More non-medical cultural significance expressions are involved, based on the different cultural backgrounds and creative purposes. These include metaphors and critiques of transnational economic activities that harm the ecological environment, such as the virus in *Contagion* that originates from bats, while the root cause is the destruction of Southeast Asian forests by the American company AIMM, which has deprived the bats of their habitats. The unknown virus that causes an epidemic in Japan in *Pandemic* originates from the fictional small Southeast Asian country of Yavan, but it is rooted in the destruction of forests and local ecosystems by the shrimp farming companies that supply Japan. The prehistoric parasites frozen in the Arctic ice in the US–Canadian co-production film *The Thaw* (2009, directed by Mark A. Lewis) (Figure 25), are resurrected as the glaciers melt, and the cause of the Arctic glacier meltdown is global warming from the greenhouse effect due to human activities. There are fear and reflection on the misuse

of technology, the manufacture of biological and chemical weapons, and man-made viruses. For example, the spread of the Motaba virus and its new variants in *Outbreak* is related to the deliberate concealment of the manufacture of biological and chemical weapons by the US military. There is also imagery of alien viruses, fear of the end of mankind, and speculation about the post-apocalyptic era, such as *The Invasion* (2007, directed by Oliver Hirschbiegel) and *The Andromeda Strain*. The racial prejudice and cultural discrimination embedded in the source-tracing symbols have received the most scholarly attention.

The usual characterisation of plague is that it invariably comes from somewhere else (Sontag 1990), as in *Pandemic*, *The Flu*, *Contagion*, and *Carriers*. For example, *Pandemic* traces the unknown virus that ravaged Japan to the small Southeast Asian country of Yavan, and *The Flu* traces the pandemic virus to stowaways from Southeast Asia. This appears to be a scientific tracing of the source of the disease, but is actually a culturally discriminatory “racist imagery” of Southeast Asia. The unknown virus that causes an epidemic in the US in *Contagion* originated from bats in the forests of Southeast Asia, infected pigs, and Chinese chefs, and was then brought to the US by “patient zero”, Beth from Hong Kong, to Macau, China, from where it spread around the world. *Carriers* has an inserted shot of a black and yellow-skinned Asian man tied to a highway pole with a sign around his neck that reads ‘CHINKS BROUGHT IT’

(the virus) (Figure 26). The use of symbolic images and symbols to “pin the Chinese to the pillar of shame as the source of the disease” is a form of naked and unabashedly racist imagery.



Figure 25: *The Thaw*. The prehistoric parasites were found in Arctic ice.



Figure 26: *Carriers*. An Asian man tied to a pole on the highway.

In contrast, in Chinese films such as *SARS* (2003, directed by Wai-man Cheng), *Zui Mei Ni Xing* (2020, directed by Shu-hua Hu and others), and *Chinese Doctors*, the tracing symbols for the source of the disease are missing. For example, *Chinese Doctors* only uses subtitles and voice-overs (i.e., linguistic symbols) at the beginning of the film to name an unknown acute infectious epidemic “Pneumonia of Unknown Causes”, and the film does not specify the source of the infectious disease or make any attempt to trace it. On the one hand, medical scientific research has not yet discovered where the COVID-19 virus originated from in reality. On the other, by placing the symbolic metaphors related to the virus within the realm of medical science, the film is making another response to the “fantasies” of “racist paranoids” about that virus.

Responding to the Crisis: Political Metaphors of Quarantine, Rescue, and Destruction

In reality, responding to public health emergencies and the social crises they bring is the function and responsibility of the WHO and governments. There are many ways to respond to a crisis, which may include isolation, rescue, destruction, and others. In the epidemic narratives of films such as *Chinese Doctors*, *The Cassandra Crossing*, *Outbreak*, *Contagion*, *The Flu*, and *Pandemic*, although methods such as quarantine, treatment, and destruction are used by the WHO and governments to deal with epidemic crises, the political significance of their symbolic metaphors differs.

The WHO, the Chinese government, and related agencies are portrayed in a positive light in the epidemic narrative of *Chinese Doctors*. The WHO appears four times: three times in the Chinese news, recognising and thanking China for its efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and once when it sends experts to Wuhan (Figure 27) who witness the collectivism and altruism demonstrated by the 10 million Wuhan citizens who spontaneously quarantined themselves at home. The WHO in the film is a symbol, a metaphor for the recognition by international organisations and other countries of the effectiveness of China's fight against the epidemic, its medical technology, its solidarity, and its social system. The Chinese government and related agencies appear in the film in terms of subtitles and news reports. The leading group set up by the CPC Central Committee and its chief official, played by Ting Mei, is the most

representative symbol. The containment, quarantine, and treatment of Wuhan citizens, and the rush of assistance from the army and others were all organised and led by the CPC and the government, as represented by the leading group, and ultimately achieved victory in the fight against the epidemic. The tenor of the film's epidemic narrative thus switches to a political paean.

Unlike Chinese films about epidemics and disasters, which are mostly political paeans, the symbolic metaphors of foreign films such as *The Cassandra Crossing*, *Outbreak*, and *Contagion*, point to a more critical view of power. For example, in *The Cassandra Crossing*, the infected escaping terrorists bring the pneumonic plague virus developed by the US military onto a train, putting more than 1,000 passengers in danger. The US representative of the WHO in Geneva, Colonel McKenzie of the Army Intelligence Department (Figure 28), follows the orders of his superiors when addressing the crisis, despite the objections of WHO experts. He orders the train to be rerouted to Janov, Poland, in an attempt to stage an accident on the abandoned Cassandra Bridge and cover up the truth. In *Outbreak*, the spread of the Motaba virus and its new variants is linked to the manufacture of biochemical weapons by the US military. To keep this secret, the US military command orders the dropping of incendiary bombs with the intention of destroying the infected town of Cedar Creek, along with the virus (Figure 29), which is an extremely cruel act. In these films, the villains who carry out the order of

massacre on behalf of the government or the military, such as Colonel McKenzie in *The Cassandra Crossing* and General McLean in *Outbreak*, are highly symbolic characters, whose metaphorical significance does not lie in the characters themselves, but rather in the critique of power. Films such as *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Crazies* have similar scenes, in which the government or the military go out of their way to massacre everyone in the infected or quarantined areas under their control, in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus and to keep secret their development of biochemical weapons, all of which have a very strong critique of power.

The South Korean film *The Flu* expresses a more complex critique of power and a sense of state power. A flu epidemic in the South Korean city of Bundang triggers riots when the city is placed under mandatory quarantine in which no one, sick or healthy, is allowed to leave. The US representative in Korea and the South Korean Prime Minister decide to carry out the US plan to clean up the city, that is, to bomb the entire city. The South Korean President orders the country's army to counter the US bombing with missiles to protect the local population (Figure 30). After the strong insistence of the South Korean president, the US finally gives in and terminates the city-clearing plan. The fighting epidemic by quarantine was rewritten as South Korea's "battle for independence" and expressed South Korea's desire for national

independence and autonomy: this is an extremely significant symbolic metaphor of national political ideology.



Figure 27: *Chinese Doctors*. WHO experts go to Wuhan.



Figure 28: *Carriers*. The colonel orders the train to be routed to Janov.



Figure 29: *Outbreak*. The US military drops firebombs.



Figure 30: *The Flu*. The South Korean President orders the army to prepare missiles.

Rescue from the Disaster: The Human Nature Metaphor of Dilemma

The dilemma of rescuing people or them rescuing themselves, or rescuing the few or the many, is the so-called “Trolley Problem” in film epidemic narratives, which has no correct answer. At the level of the state, government, or social organisations, the dilemma is mainly related to political ideology and economic interests. For example, in *The Flu*, the US military formulates a plan to bomb Bundang, and in *Outbreak*, the US President approves a plan to bomb Cedar Creek. These decisions are based on the utilitarian principle of sacrificing a few people

to protect the majority and even the whole of mankind. Dilemmas at the individual level are mainly related to human nature, morality, ethics, and values.

Disaster is a touchstone of human nature. In the face of a sudden epidemic disaster, some people choose to sacrifice themselves to save others and become heroes, revealing the light of human goodness. For example, the doctors represented by Zhang Jing-yu in *Chinese Doctors* and the doctors who rushed to Wuhan from Shanghai and Guangzhou are all heroes in their battles against the epidemic. These self-sacrificing and selfless heroes are not only realistic characters, such as Zhang Jing-yu, who is based on the director of Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital, but are also characters with symbolic significance who represent the 540,000 medical personnel in Wuhan, the 346 national medical teams, the 40,000 or more medical workers who rushed to Wuhan. Thus, the heroes who represent the image of Chinese doctors in the film all shine with the light of human goodness. Dr Sam Daniels in *Outbreak* is a fictional symbolic character and an American hero who dares to disobey military orders, exposes the conspiracy of General McLean and others, tracks down the source of the new virus, researches a serum to combat it, and saves his ex-wife along with the residents of Cedar Creek. Dr Chamberlain in *The Cassandra Crossing* and Dr Eiko Kobayashi and Dr Tsuyoshi Matsuoka in *Pandemic* are all heroes. Although these symbolic heroes are from different countries, have different values, and

embody different ideologies, they all share the commonality of human goodness.

The antitheses of the heroes are extremely selfish people who only save themselves, and even harm others for their own benefit and make money from disasters. This exposes the dark side of human nature. For example, the four young men and women in *Carriers* rob and shoot people they meet on the road, abandon their virus-infected lovers, shoot their virus-infected brothers to save themselves, and commit other crimes. It is not the virus that causes their demise but the evil in human nature deep in their hearts. The ordinary people fighting over supplies in films like *Pandemic* and *The Flu* (Figure 31), and the terrorists in *The Cassandra Crossing*, are selfish. Alan Krumwiede, the reporter in *Contagion*, who spreads his conspiracy theory and disinformation and who makes a fortune from the disaster, is a highly selfish person with symbolic meaning and is thus a metaphor for the evil of human nature.

Most of the characters in epidemic disaster films are somewhere between heroic and selfish, as they first choose to save themselves and then try to save others. For example, Dr Yang Xiao-yang in *Chinese Doctors* is transformed from a timid man who is afraid of the dead to a hero who dares to sacrifice himself by practising the technique of intubation. Dr Ally Hextall in *Contagion* experiments with a new vaccine on herself because of the urgency of the situation, and her motivation is not only to save all of humanity but also personally to save her

father who is dying from the virus. Dr Kim In-hae in *The Flu* tries to smuggle her infected daughter out of the quarantine zone despite the risk of spreading the virus (Figure 32). After developing the serum, she first injects her daughter despite the risk, to save both her daughter and to complete her experiment so she can save more people. These highly symbolic characters and their behaviour, which is both selfish and altruistic, are metaphors for the complexity of human nature.



Figure 31: *The Flu*. People fighting for supplies.



Figure 22: *The Flu*. Kim In-hae smuggles her infected daughter out.

The socio-cultural symbolic metaphors of film epidemic narratives are typically at what Fisk and Hartley (2003) calls the “third level” of symbolic representation, as they have metaphorical meanings related to religion, politics, culture, human nature, and race, pointing to what Barthes (1972) calls “myth”, or ideology. The metaphorical myths or ideologies in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films, as previously noted, have more differences than similarities.

Conclusion

Disaster films that have epidemics at the core of their narratives involve a semiotic system with multiple metaphorical meanings. Based on our framework of analysis as depicted in Table 2, this study focuses on analysing 45 epidemic disaster films from China, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US, and finds that the medical symbols in their narratives have referential meanings related to three main aspects, namely the occurrence of epidemics, the treatment of epidemics, and the public health system. Their direct and derived meanings provide cognitive information about mass infectious epidemics and methods of treatment and prevention. When medical and non-medical symbols are integrated, they form socio-cultural symbols that are rich in metaphorical meaning. “Tracing the origin of disease” involves a cultural metaphor that goes beyond medicine; “Responding to the crisis” involves a political metaphor of quarantine, rescue, and destruction; and “Rescue from the disaster” involves the human nature related metaphor of dilemma.

The history of epidemic disaster films in China is shorter than that of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and the US, and fewer films have been produced. These films primarily include scientific medical symbols, and they inevitably address the abovementioned aspects of epidemics. The medical symbols of epidemics and their metaphors have more similarities than differences in Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films. However, the socio-cultural symbolic metaphors of film epidemic narratives are typically at the third level of symbolic representation, and their

metaphorical meanings point to so-called myths or ideologies. Due to differences in the permissible scope and freedom of this symbolic coding, the metaphorical myths or ideologies of Chinese and foreign epidemic disaster films have more differences than similarities. While medical technology and social culture are constantly developing and changing, the stylistic form and the symbolic metaphorical system in epidemic disaster films are still being explored and are in the process of construction and evolution. Thus, continuing to study the changes in medical and socio-cultural symbols and their metaphors in epidemic disaster films is worthwhile in future research.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ [Editor's Note]: CINEJ has published highly interesting and influential articles in the past on this subject such as Thomas and Mathew (2021), Ekinci (2022), Acaralp (2025). The authors' contribution is highly original and brings unique perspective from an understudied angle.