Is COVID-19 Like a Zombie Apocalypse? Using Horror Films to Examine the Pandemic and Social Inequalities

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has both exposed and exacerbated many enduring social inequalities in countries throughout the world. Sociology instructors are thus likely to incorporate content related to this relationship between the pandemic and inequalities in their courses. This article explores the potential of horror films, specifically the subgenre of zombie apocalypse, as a teaching tool for critically analyzing social inequalities and the COVID-19 pandemic. To examine the usefulness of this subgenre of film, I describe and evaluate an assignment and class discussion.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, inequalities, zombie, film

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The COVID-19 global pandemic has necessitated significant alterations to course delivery and teaching strategies for many instructors. Although aspects of teaching and learning are starting to resemble prepandemic instruction, there have also been discussions around more lasting changes and takeaways from the experience of teaching during a pandemic, including designing courses to be flexible and adaptable to different instruction delivery modes (Miller 2020). While articles and tweets about teaching during the pandemic have provided numerous suggestions for course design and teaching techniques, fewer have focused on content-specific strategies. Yet the pandemic has not just changed how sociology instructors teach; it has also changed what we teach. Dubbed the “inequality virus,” COVID-19 has freshly exposed and exacerbated social inequalities in countries around the world (Ali, Asaria, and Stranges 2020). As a result, sociology instructors are likely to incorporate content on the relationship between the pandemic and inequalities in their courses.

The pandemic has presented new challenges for instructors as well as new opportunities (and a renewed importance) for teaching social inequalities. This article is designed to provide an instruction tool for the sociological examination of the pandemic and social inequalities. First, I provide background on the relationship between the pandemic and inequalities and show how the pandemic has complicated sociological instruction. I then review the use of feature films for teaching social inequalities and make the case to include the horror genre, and more specifically, the zombie apocalypse subgenre. Finally, I describe and analyze a writing assignment designed to help students critically examine inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic using zombie apocalypse films. Overall,
zombie films are a useful pedagogical tool for applying complex theories to concrete examples and engaging students’ sociological imaginations. I encourage instructors to consider drawing on these or similar films to teach inequality from a global, sociological perspective.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**COVID-19 and Teaching Social Inequalities**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many enduring societal fault lines into stark relief. While older adults and people living with chronic health conditions and disabilities were first to be identified as vulnerable populations, rates of COVID-related morbidity and mortality are disproportionately higher for other marginalized populations, particularly, racial- and ethnic-minority communities (Nanda 2021). And although wealthier countries like the United States have been hit hard, populations of lower socioeconomic status (SES) have experienced a greater risk of illness and death from COVID-19 within individual countries (Figueiredo et al. 2020; Wachtler et al. 2020). While COVID-19 is a new virus, these differentiated rates of infection and illness reflect long-standing social and economic inequalities resulting from larger systems of oppression (Ali et al. 2020). In turn, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified social, economic, and health inequalities. Pandemic-related policies and public discourse, in particular, have exacerbated preexisting inequalities by fueling stigma and blame (Gardner, Briggs, and Ryan 2021; Yoshioka and Maeda 2020), racism and xenophobia (Elias et al. 2021), social isolation (Wu 2020), ageism (Silva et al. 2021), sexism (Dlamini 2021), ableism (Andrews et al. 2021; Sakellariou, Malfitano, and Rotarou 2020), and more.

These far-reaching and potentially long-term impacts make the pandemic important to explore in sociology courses, even “postpandemic.” As a global crisis, the pandemic also encourages a globalized approach to examining social inequalities within the classroom. As such, the pandemic presents an important opportunity for sociology students, particularly, U.S. students, to deepen and nuance their understandings of social inequalities through a global lens (Arabandi, Sweet, and Swords 2014). However, the pandemic also adds a layer of complexity to teaching social stratification and social inequalities, a topic area that has a reputation for being difficult to teach undergraduate students (Garoute and Bobbitt-Zeher 2011). One common challenge for instructors is that students are often resistant to questioning the existing social structure through a sociological lens (Coghlan and Huggins 2004; Stout, Earnhart, and Nagi 2020). Relatedly, examining social inequalities from a sociological perspective is a new learning experience for many students. And while the experience of living through a pandemic should facilitate interest in examining connections between the pandemic and inequality, there may still be resistance to a sociological examination. As Kleinman and Copp (2009) explain, students bring into the classroom understandings of the world that often reflect folk beliefs. These widespread conventional understandings tend to focus on the individual experience and responsibility of inequality, which poses an obstacle to a sociological analysis of systemic and institutionalized inequalities (Kleinman and Copp 2009).

Social inequalities in health is a particularly challenging topic for sociology students, since the conventional understandings that students bring into the classroom are heavily shaped by the medical model of Western science (Pescosolido 1990). This more reductionist perspective focuses on “downstream” determinants of health that are closest in time and space to illness and injury (Braveman, Egerter, and Williams 2011; Gehlert et al. 2008). From this view, differences in health are largely understood as the result of individual behaviors (diet, physical activity, going to the doctor), biology, and genetics. As such, a primary goal for sociology instructors is igniting students’ sociological imaginations by linking these “downstream” factors to more “upstream” social determinants of health, such as social and economic policies (smoking bans, minimum wage rates), workplace hazards, and stigma discourses that attach negative social labels to marginalized statuses. With this focus, disparities in health outcomes are understood as resulting from inequalities within structural, cultural, and environmental systems and conditions (Friel and Marmot 2011).

Student folk beliefs are an ever-present challenge for instructors, and the pandemic has been no exception. Media narratives have politicized, individualized, and pathologized pandemic experiences and outcomes in many countries, especially in the United States (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020; Ntontis et al. 2022). In addition to a public focus on individual “bad actors,” such as cases of people refusing to wear masks or hoarding toilet paper,
there have also been inaccurate and harmful medical claims that Black Americans are at a greater risk for severe effects from COVID-19 due to biological differences (Gravlee 2020). Conversely, phrases such as “We’re all in the same boat” and “We’re all in this together” have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic to convey the belief that pandemic hardship is an equally shared experience (Bowleg 2020).

An additional challenge for instructors is the complexity of the theoretical frameworks used to examine social inequalities. Intersectionality, for example, can be a challenging framework for students to apply given the focus on both the larger, often invisible, intersecting power relations that shape social relations and the lived experience that results from multiple, intersecting identities (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020). As other professors have noted, and as I have learned through my own teaching experience, students tend to individualize and essentialize intersectionality (Jones and Wijeyesinghe 2011). Yet, this framework is a critical tool for examining social inequalities, and this is no less true for social inequalities related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Horror Films as a Teaching Device**

Horror films can be a useful approach to addressing these pedagogical challenges. Incorporating feature films into courses facilitates sociological thinking by providing concrete examples for abstract concepts and complex theories (Livingston 2004; Pelton 2012; Pescosolido 1990; Tipton and Tiemann 1993). In particular, films can serve as a “case” for applying and testing sociological theories (Pescosolido 1990:339). In this usage, feature films are treated as case studies, or specific examples of phenomena, events, groups, and so on, through which sociological theories are applied. This strategy encourages active sociological learning through the medium of film. In addition, feature films are familiar to students, which may increase student interest in applying sociological theories (Pelton 2012; Pescosolido 1990). While Pescosolido (1990) argues for films to be shown in the classroom and paired with instructor direction throughout the viewing experience, compelling cases have also been made for pairing films with writing assignments outside of class (Livingston 2004; Pelton 2012).

Scholars and teachers have documented the benefits of incorporating films in sociology courses at length over the past several decades. However, these discussions have focused on the genres of drama and comedy (Livingston 2004; Messinger 2012; Pelton 2012; Pescosolido 1990; Tan and Ko 2004). Horror films have not been as thoroughly examined for their potential as a teaching tool, despite their volume and range of social content (Benshoff 2014; Coleman 2013; Lee 2016; Platts 2013; Wonser and Boyns 2016). The horror sub-genre of zombie apocalypse is particularly well suited for students to examine social inequalities. For those unfamiliar, a zombie apocalypse is a fictional end-of-the-world account of a spreading plague of dead people who have become undead (no longer alive but able to ambulate). These zombies act as “infected agents of the apocalypse” driven to attack and infect the living, although there are many variations on this general description (Booth 2015). This zombie apocalypse archetype has gained popularity globally in recent decades, with films, series, books, comics, and video games now available from many different countries (NPR 2019; Platts 2013).

Beyond their popularity, there are two well-known maxims about zombies and zombie apocalypse films that demonstrate their suitability to sociological examination in the classroom. First, zombies are rarely the true monsters. Indeed, the zombies of zombie apocalypse films can be viewed as victims of not only a contagion but also systemic inequalities. When the origin of the outbreak is identified in films, it is often traced back to the actions of institutional (corporate, scientific, political, military) elites (Wonser and Boyns 2016). These causal stories are also sometimes extended to include social issues, such as corporate greed, racism, environmental destruction, and bioterrorism. Social inequalities can also be viewed in depictions of who becomes infected and who remains uninfected. Those who survive (for a longer period of time) in zombie apocalypse films tend to have greater access to valuable resources (Wonser and Boyns 2016). Likewise, portrayals of efforts to contain the outbreak and the treatment of people once they become zombies (or are believed to be zombies) in films can often be connected to the social processes of stigmatization and discrimination (Reis Filho 2020). These types of themes and depictions in zombie apocalypse films provide concrete examples for testing and applying sociological theories of inequalities and for the critical examination of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, and related to the first, zombies are never just zombies; they also serve as metaphors
for different collective fears. This relationship between zombies and larger systemic forces and social fears can be traced back through ethno-graphic accounts to the origins of the (Haitian) zombie in Haitian slavery and revolution. According to these narratives, the zombie represented a feared fate for African slaves/ex-slaves, of existing as living dead under the horrific conditions of enslaved labor (Bishop 2010; NPR 2019). While the framing of the Haitian zombie myth origin as a response to Western imperialism has been critiqued for its oversimplification and narrow focus (Thomas 2010), zombie mythology is rooted in fears of oppression more broadly and the loss of self-possessed subjectivity. As Thomas (2010:5) states, “The zombie is not focused exclusively on the historical relationship between Western cultures and Africa, but it does represent the slave in cosmic terms.” Likewise, the appropriation of Haitian zombie mythology in Western ethno-graphic narratives and North American films adds another layer of significance to the zombie as a symbol of other-possessed subjectivity (Hoermann 2017).

The current zombie apocalypse archetype that appropriates this zombie myth has been employed in popular culture to invoke the fears and uncertainties of living in modern societies characterized by inequality and manufactured risk (Lavin and Lowe 2015). Zombies in these apocalyptic scenarios serve to signify not only fears of infection and losing oneself (such as the liminality of being on a ventilator due to COVID-19) but also the fear of the collapse of society through war, disaster, social change, or an infectious disease like COVID-19. As Lavin and Lowe (2015:116) describe, “As a fantasy creature, zombies symbolize our uncertainties, but also provide a safe distance from our myriad fears by displaying impossible characteristics.” And while many zombie apocalypse films engage, critically or uncritically, with specific themes and social issues, such as neoliberalism, racism, climate change, globalization, and stigmatization, the zombie as a symbol of fear allows for a wide range of interpretations. As Cohen (2012:402) explains, “No single interpretation can capture a monstrous totality, no matter how persuasive that analysis might be. Monsters are more than the contexts that attended their births.” In this way, students can read into zombies many different social fears and issues, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These defining qualities of zombie apocalypse films, in addition to their worldwide popularity, make them a particularly helpful tool for students to explore social inequalities of the COVID-19 pandemic and sociological, theoretical precepts underlying these inequalities. I use the rest of this article to share an example of how zombie apocalypse films can be effectively implemented as a teaching tool in sociology courses. I also address potential concerns about using horror films in courses and provide suggestions for navigating these issues and adapting the assignment to different teaching scenarios.

BACKGROUND OF COURSE

I taught a nine-student undergraduate course focused on COVID-19 and global inequalities during the winter of 2021 at a small, private university. Most students were first-year undergraduates who had not taken a sociology course before, and roughly one-third were living in countries outside of the United States for the duration of the course. I conducted the course completely online with daily synchronous sessions held over Zoom in conjunction with online individual and group-based activities and assignments.

An overarching question I posed to students early in the course was “Is it true that ‘we are all in the same boat’ during this pandemic?” The two overarching frameworks that structured the course and helped students think critically about this guiding question were intersectionality and social determinants of health. Students were first introduced to these frameworks through the examination of prepandemic patterns of inequalities and their causes using readings, videos, in-class activities, and lecture content. We then focused on using these conceptual tools to investigate the impact of the pandemic on social inequalities and health disparities, with an emphasis on exploring both global and country-specific processes and trends.

ASSIGNMENT AND CLASS DISCUSSION

Assignment Design

The writing assignment was implemented as a medium-stakes assessment designed to facilitate a deeper understanding and application of sociological theories and social inequalities during COVID-19. The students were asked to investigate the similarities and differences between the social inequalities depicted in a popular zombie apocalypse film and those being experienced during the current pandemic (using course materials
to support). As such, the students examined the zombie film as a comparative hypothetical pandemic “case” to think more critically about inequalities during the current pandemic and test their understanding by applying relevant sociological theories and concepts.

I used a student-centered approach to design the assignment. I first asked the students if they were comfortable watching a horror/zombie film and doing an assignment based on it. They all indicated that they were comfortable with this idea, but I also notified them that they could talk to me if they changed their mind. I also encouraged students to read content warnings and parental guide ratings before starting the film and to do “self-care” while viewing the film, including taking breaks and skipping scenes if needed. Since there were only nine students, I asked them to vote on whether everyone should watch the same film, groups of two or three should watch the same film, or everyone should watch a different film. The students decided they wanted to have groups of two or three watch the same film.

I provided the students with a list of possible films for this assignment but also encouraged them to suggest additional films. Given the global focus of our course, I included films from different countries. I set up a discussion board on our course learning management system and encouraged students to post which film they were interested in watching. The final list of films the groups chose to watch were *Train to Busan* (South Korea, 2016), *28 Days Later* (United Kingdom, 2002), *Les Affamés/The Ravenous* (Canada, 2017), and *Us* (United States, 2019). Each of these films is unique in characters, plot, and setting (and it should be noted that *Us* is not considered a conventional zombie film). However, the films share two important commonalities: First, they depict apocalyptic/crisis events where humans are fighting for survival against a novel, deadly, and quickly escalating epidemic. Second, their themes encourage a critical examination of the relationship between pandemics and systemic inequalities across dimensions such as social class, race/ethnicity, age, and gender.

Students watched the films and completed the assignment individually before our class discussion. Our course content had covered aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the respective country where each of the films takes place, and I also offered optional readings (mostly news articles and short research papers/commentaries related to COVID-19) for each context that the students could draw from for their papers. I watched the four films and tailored these country-specific materials to focus on the specific social inequalities depicted or suggested in the films. In the instructions for the assignment, I also provided some guiding questions they could consider while watching the film and writing their paper.

### Assignment Submissions

Students submitted papers that demonstrated that they could successfully apply sociological theories to the pandemic scenarios presented in each of the films. The papers also showed critical thinking about the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and inequalities, particularly those involving race, (dis)ability, social class, gender, and age. Most students focused on similarities, as opposed to differences, between the film and the current pandemic, using the film’s depiction of social inequalities as a springboard to describe and analyze inequalities related to COVID-19, and thoughtfully applied course content to support their analysis. For example, one student described the portrayal of health disparities in *Us*, stating,

> The film portrays Pluto, the clone of Jason, as the person who has a serious burn on his face, meaning that Pluto cannot receive the proper medical treatment. Furthermore, Gabe wears glasses although Abraham, the clone of Gabe, does not wear glasses. This scene demonstrates that Abraham has been forced to live in an inadequate environment despite having the same bodies [sic] and poor eyesight.

This observation engages the social determinants of health framework by pointing to the unequal living conditions and differential access to resources as the driving forces behind health disparities. The student then went on to connect this example of a health disparity resulting from unequal life circumstances in the film to those in the pandemic:

> Regarding the health implications of COVID-19… marginalized people have encountered a lot of health disadvantages compared to the dominating people… many risky and stressful frontline jobs are occupied by the most marginalized people with low pay.

The assignment also encouraged students to be attentive to the country context in terms of the social inequalities depicted in the film and those
related to the COVID-19 pandemic. A student who watched *Les Affamés/The Ravenous* stated,

While a black man appears in the beginning, he encounters a zombie and gets killed first. This inclusion of a black man who dies first of all the main characters illustrates the social context in Quebec where white francophones are the majority and privileged while minority groups are often marginalized (CBC Radio, 2018). Quebec is protective of its culture, so it tends to differentiate and discriminate against other groups based on their cultures, religions, and races. For example, Muslim women who wear the niqab have limited access to public services because the government bans religious face coverings in public space for security and identification reasons (Stansbury, 2020). Even though other people are encouraged to wear masks to prevent COVID-19, religious face coverings are not allowed, which indicates how Quebec society discriminates against minority groups by practicing othering.

The student then connected this practice of othering during COVID-19 in Quebec to the United States, saying,

...Chinese American people experienced racial violence and discrimination based on the wrong belief that coronavirus is a Chinese people’s disease. Such inaccurate ideas and harsh experiences result in stigmatizing them.

A couple of the students also critically analyzed the differences between the pandemic context depicted in the films and COVID-19. As one student who watched *28 Days Later* described, “In the film, the government and society completely collapsed. In 2020, neither of these things happened, explaining why social inequalities were exacerbated....”

The students frequently made important connections between individual-level experiences and meso- and macrolevel processes, and many applied both intersectionality and social determinants of health in their analyses. However, the papers also showed me that while students successfully applied intersectionality in terms of the lived experience, they often remained more focused on the individual level. For example, one student who watched *Train to Busan* wrote,

For example, it’s not just Soo Ahn’s gender that contributes to her image of being weak, it is also her age. When looking at a person and what contributes to their feelings of inferiority and inequality, it can only be solved if the person is looked at as a whole, not in parts. When looking how to solve these social inequalities we have to understand the intersectionality of each person.

Reading student applications of intersectionality to concrete examples in the films as opposed to more abstract theoretical writing was helpful for me as the instructor because it enabled me to assess their understanding and provide individual feedback highlighting the connection to larger power relations and group-level processes. I could also adjust upcoming lectures to reiterate this bridge between biography and history (Mills 1959).

**Class Discussion**

After students submitted their papers, we discussed the assignment in our synchronous class. Students who had watched the same film were put into their own breakout rooms to discuss their experiences and takeaways about social inequalities and COVID-19. After 15 minutes in breakout rooms, we discussed the films as a class. The small-group and large-group discussions served to direct their attention to aspects of the films and connections to the COVID-19 pandemic that they missed. We also discussed the intentionality of the filmmakers and problematic folk beliefs conveyed in the films (Livingston 2004). For example, several students addressed in their papers the relationship between ableism and pandemics, or racism and pandemics, by discussing how people with disabilities and BIPOC were killed in the film. I was able to extend those observations to include a discussion about ableism and racism in films. I also asked the students to consider what messages about social inequalities and pandemics a person who was not in our course might take away from the films. This discussion after the assignment was helpful for bringing more nuance to their reading of the films.

**RESULTS**

**Student Feedback and Instructor Reflection**

A few days after the students completed the assignment and class discussion, I sent an anonymous survey with questions concerning their experiences.
having a short list of science fiction/dystopian/drama film options ready) are critical. Moreover, reminding students to notify professors of concerns is an important dynamic in any classroom and especially applies to assignments that feature horror and horror-adjacent genres.

One of the strengths of this assignment is its flexibility and adaptability to different teaching situations. Many aspects of the assignment can be modified, including number and content of films and countries of focus. It can also be implemented in in-person, online, and hybrid-formatted courses with minimal adjustments. For example, in an online course without a synchronous lecture, class discussions can take place over discussion boards. For my class, I made sure that all the films on my list of options were available on major streaming platforms, such as Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon. University, college, and local libraries may also offer digital access to the films through subscriptions to services like Kanopy or Hoopla.

**CONCLUSION**

The written analyses and conversations that resulted from this assignment and class discussion, as well as the feedback from the students, provide strong support for the inclusion of horror films, and more specifically, zombie apocalypse films, in sociology courses that examine the relationship between inequalities and the COVID-19 pandemic. The assignment embraces many of the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic for teaching through a sociological lens. In particular, with a focus on films from different countries, the assignment reflects the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and encourages a global mindset in students. Students also enjoyed the assignment. Their familiarity with and interest in zombie films likely lowered any resistance to examining social inequalities through a sociological lens and assisted them in understanding and applying complex theories in their writing. The class discussion after the assignment was also helpful for adding nuance to student interpretations and students were able to engage in peer learning, sharing their analyses of the films and gaining new insights from one another. Additionally, both the assignment and class discussion are tailorable to different student and instructor needs.

Most importantly, the assignment and class discussion were effective in encouraging critical
thinking about the relationship between the pandemic and social inequalities. Zombie apocalypse films proved to be useful comparative cases through which students could apply complex theory to concrete examples and identify similarities and dissimilarities between different pandemic cases, gaining a deeper understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic and social inequalities in the process. In closing, the pandemic has challenged sociology instructors to turn to new content and teaching strategies. My hope is that this article has provided a helpful tool for navigating these changes and has encouraged instructors to (re)consider incorporating horror films into their courses.

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NOTES

1. This study was approved by the Soka University of America Institutional Review Board (Project ID: 21W14).
2. Film list encompassing different topics, themes, pandemic phases, regions, and time periods available upon request.
3. Assignment instructions available upon request.

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