

## The Quarantine Narrative of Epidemic Films: A Case study of South

### Korean Film *The Flu*

Zhang Siyang<sup>1</sup>, Huang Yafei<sup>2,\*</sup>, Mai Yongxiong<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Liberal Arts, Lanzhou University

<sup>2</sup>Advanced Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Chongqing University

<sup>3</sup>School of Liberal Arts / School of Journalism and Communication, Guangxi Normal University

\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** In the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, the resurgence of epidemic films has attracted attention and research from scholars, and the discourse of such works and research status should be comprehensively examined in the post-pandemic era. Quarantine is often the most traditional non-medical intervention in epidemic prevention and control, and it often becomes a typical narrative space in epidemic films. The Korean film *The Flu* (2013), the representation of quarantine serves as a form of social critique. It not only dramatizes conflicts surrounding the pandemic but also reflects Korea's desire for independence, offers a critique of the economically privileged class and reframes the relationship between facts and values. During the prevalence of the novel coronavirus, cultural debates involving Agamben, Nancy, Esposito, and others serve as a reference point for the film *the Flu*, offering a rich interpretative space within its quarantine scenes. This paper conducts a biopolitical analysis of the isolation scenes in "Flu," revealing the power dynamics and ideological nuances inherent in the represented quarantine through a contrast analysis of reality and visual narratives. Through a comparative analysis of how the quarantine is represented, this paper decodes how the epidemic prevention and control measures serve to construct and dismantle the binary opposition between the unhealthy/healthy, people/government, poverty/privileged, science/politics, and facts/values, highlighting the reality concerns of literary and art research. The dismantling of binary oppositions eliminates the estrangement resulting from prejudices or preconceptions, facilitating the construction of a genuine community of life.

**Keywords:** Epidemic films; *The Flu*; Narrative space; Quarantine scene; Ideology

OEDIPUS: What means this reek of incense everywhere  
And everywhere laments and litanies?

——*Oedipus Rex*

The first act of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* depicts the city of Thebes suffering from a plague, with countless lives lost and the populace facing misfortune. People gather in front of the palace to beg the king for help. This play is based on the 430–427 BC plague in Athens, where the burning of fragrant herbs was used as preventative measure, following Hippocrates scientific discovery that fire could kill airborne viruses. Since then narratives of infectious diseases in world literature and art include many noteworthy examples, including *The Decameron* (1350–1353), *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), *White Deer Plain* (1993), and *The SARS Crisis* (2003). Historical truth intersects with artistic freedom of representation in such works, which work to engrave in human memory the fear of infectious diseases, such as smallpox, cholera, plague, and SARS, as well as bear witness to humanity's various attempts to overcome viruses.

Quarantine is one of the key measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases; significantly, its implementation requires a partnership between science and politics. For example, in *Kings* from *The Bible*, the king ordered lepers to live outside the city of Samaria and forbade them from entering. *The Qin bamboo slips from Yumen* (《云梦秦简》) also legislated that "lepers" (疠者) should migrate to a "leper colony" (疠迁所) for dwelling. Even today, when medical and technological levels have developed to a high degree, quarantine remains the most effective official epidemic prevention policy. As we have seen, such political controversies are often thematized in works of epidemic film and fiction. Recently, following the outbreak of Covid-2019, the film and television industry responded with films about epidemics such as "Coronavirus Pandemic: A Tale of Two Washingtons" (2020), "Most Beautiful Loops" (《最美逆行》, 2020) and "Human and Work" (《人と仕事》, 2021). These works are either set against the story of Covid-19 as it unfolds or introduce the pandemic as a source of narrative conflict, a turning point or a topical subject matter for the metaphorical representation of reality or the fable. Without exception, these works touch on the unique

epidemic prevention measure of quarantine and the politics surrounding such measures.

There are many discussions surrounding the history of quarantine as represented in film and television<sup>①</sup>, such that we might even speak of a genre, even if the nomenclature remains undecided, with terms such as "Virus Films", "Plague Films" and "Disaster Movies" in circulation<sup>②</sup>. This paper suggests that we use the term "Epidemic Films" for three reasons. First, The term "disaster" encompasses both natural catastrophes such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, meteor impacts, tornadoes, and the like, as well as man-made disasters like viruses, zombies, artificial intelligence malfunctions, and terrorist organizations. Additionally, it includes extraterrestrial invasions involving large-scale aggression by alien organisms, mutants/prehistoric creatures, monsters, and other forms of external intrusion. Categorizing such films simply as disaster movies fails to highlight their distinctive characteristics. Second, "plague" and "virus" have been imbued with a negative connotation since ancient times, causing people to dread them. "Epidemic," on the other hand, is a more neutral way to refer to a pandemic disease in broad terms: it is free from negative emotional connotations and refers to any number of causes. Third, "epidemic" comes from the Greek word "epidemia," which combines "epi" (among, upon) and "demos" (people, district). This term can be applied to a long history of infectious disease stories, originating with *Oedipus Rex*, and places emphasis on how the epidemic impacts populations locally. Due to the centralized

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① See Yan Huaikang's article "Narrative of Isolated Enclosed Spaces: Functions and Variations," Journal of Beijing Film Academy, 7th issue of 2020, 46-61; Dai Shichang's master's thesis "Spatial Construction Research in Pandemic Films" (Guangxi University for Nationalities, 2023); Guo Xinyu's master's thesis "Viral Imagery, Group Portrayal, and Spatial Narratives" (Wuhan University, 2022); Du Huan's master's thesis "A Study on the Narrative of Epidemics in Chinese Science Fiction Novels in the New Century" (Changchun University of Science and Technology, 2023).

② Qin Xiqing's article "Metaphors of Epidemics in the Era of Globalization: Culture and Ideology of Virus Films" (Film Art Journal, 3rd issue of 2020, 42-49) is titled "Virus Films"; Wang Minzhi's article "Rethinking the 'Other' and 'Return' in the Korean Film The Flu" (Film Review, 6th issue of 2020, 21-25) and Yang Pengxin's article "Contagion: Network Narratives, Global Flows, and the World and Humanity during the Pandemic Period" (Drama and Film Review, 2nd issue of 2020, 6-23) are titled "Pandemic Films"; Jiang Feng's article "Research on Epidemic Disaster Films in a Comparative Perspective" (Sichuan Drama, 6th issue of 2020, 48-50) is titled "Epidemic Disaster Films"; Cui Chen's article "A Comparison of Epidemic Films in Eastern and Western Perspectives" (Shanghai Art Review, 3rd issue of 2020, 93-95) is titled "Epidemic Films"; Wang Xialing's Master's thesis "narrative study on 21st-century epidemic-themed films" (Sichuan Normal University, 2023) and Jennifer Cooke's "Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory, and Film". London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 is categorized as "Plague Film"; Rasmus Dahlberg & Uta Reichardt's "Disaster Movies: Definitions, Filmography, and Three Analyses." (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022)

nature of the occurrence and management of pandemics, outbreaks typically originate from one or multiple focal points. The distance from these focal points introduces variations in the strategies employed for control and mitigation.

Similar to historical instances before, Epidemic Films have attracted public attention with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, with some being regarded as prophetic depictions of the ongoing events. The South Korean epidemic film *The Flu* (2013) is one such work considered prophetic, depicting a rapid outbreak process and the intricate dynamics between stringent government measures and vehement public opposition, which closely mirror the high resemblance to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite produced nearly a decade before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this film has re-entered academic discourse due to these striking parallels. *The Flu* is a epidemic film directed by Kim Sung-su and starring Jang Hyuk and Su Ae, released in South Korea on August 14, 2013, becoming the first Korean movie to have the "flu virus" as a subject matter. The film tells the story of a group of Southeast Asian illegal immigrants who bring the flu virus into Korea and cause an outbreak. With the virus spreading rapidly, the epidemic becomes increasingly out of control, and the government deploys a large number of troops to force all citizens to be confined and inspected together. Kim In-hae(김인혜), a female doctor, injects her daughter with immunity serum after her daughter becomes infected with the virus and is placed in the quarantine area due to the rapid worsening of the situation. However, at that critical moment when the city is about to be bombed, politicians plan to sacrifice the entire city to curb the spread of the virus. With the help of firefighter Kang Ji-koo(강지구), Kim In-hae reveals to the public that her daughter is a carrier of antibodies. In the end, the crisis is resolved with everyone's collaborative efforts. Kim In-hae reunites with her daughter, falls in love with Kang Ji-koo, and the vaccine is successfully developed, and the epidemic is effectively controlled.

In addition to following the basic pattern of "silent virus transmission - massive epidemic

outbreak - overcoming the epidemic,"<sup>③</sup> the film also reveals another narrative thread: the continuous generation of "Others" associated with the spread of the virus. Before the outbreak of the virus, individuals like Mengse, Southeast Asian illegal immigrants, were considered the "Other"; after the virus spread, for the people in the Bundang, the infected individuals became the "Other"; following the virus outbreak, for the South Korean populace, people in Bundang became the "Other"; as the virus spiraled out of control, for the U.S. government, aspiring to be the "world police," the South Korean population became the "Other"; and if the pandemic rages uncontrollably, the U.S. government, and even humanity as a whole, would become the "Other" in the face of the virus. This narrative thread reinforces the film's central theme, delivering a visual warning to those deeply immersed in the pandemic crisis: in the face of a pandemic, none of us can remain indifferent to the plight of Others. This film almost prophetically narrates the combat between humanity and large-scale infectious diseases. Its portrayal of quarantine scenes is particularly emblematic and can be regarded as a speculative exploration and thought experiment. It shows how human society might respond to significant public health events, such as super pandemics, in the future.

### **The Quarantine Narrative of *The Flu***

Among the various narrative elements in epidemic films, the quarantine scene best embodies the dramatic conflict and narrative tension of epidemic films. First of all, the issue of "space" is an unavoidable problem in film studies, and the quarantine scene is an extremely special spatial form. "Film space" is the space of film as an independent art, which is "based not only on a universal spatial sense, but also on its own unique technological and artistic form." (Shao Meng 21). Unlike literary space, which requires language and words as a medium,

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③ The pattern of pandemic films is a narrative structure derived by the author through the examination of relevant works, coupled with personal experiences during Covid-19 in reality. This pattern is also evident in works such as "The Cassandra Crossing" (1976), "Outbreak" (1995), "Living Dead: Outbreak on a Plane" (2007), "Pandemic" (2009), "Contagion" (2011), "The Hot Zone" (2019), and "Chinese Doctors" (2021), reflecting the author's synthesis of cinematic portrayals and real-life encounters with the novel coronavirus.

film space is more visual and image-based, and is a combination of technology and culture, subject and object, material and consciousness. Secondly, the narrative space constructed by quarantine is a unique spatial environment in epidemic films. It is a typical environment: "a unique place where events and character types converge, composed of various layouts, these images gain special importance by constantly repeating in a standardized structure." (Thomas Schatz 75-116) Unlike the general practice in reality during the battle against epidemics, which uses hospitals, sports halls, and homes as quarantine places, epidemic films have also created some spaces more suitable for showing dramatic conflicts, such as "trains/high-speed trains/airplanes", "churches", "classrooms", "castles", etc.

The moving space formed by "trains/high-speed trains/airplanes" amplifies dramatic conflicts in both time and space. For example, in *The Cassandra Crossing*, the international police ordered the train windows and doors to be sealed to eliminate the virus and prevent secret leakage, attempting to blow up the train. Under the leadership of Dr. Zhang Bolun, the passengers on the train jumped out before the train entered the Cassandra Bridge to escape the quarantine zone in order to survive. "Trains" not only serve as the space for the entire story plot, but also as the quarantine zone established by the government in the film. In *Busanhaeng*, the outbreak of virus occurred in the compartment of a high-speed train and the survivors used the train doors to quarantine the infected and uninfected before finally escaping. *Plane Dead* was set entirely on a flight from Los Angeles to Paris, with the story starting from the flight takeoff to the crash landing. "Castles" symbolize power, darkness, independence and inviolability. In *the Masque of the Red Death*, during the rampage of the virus, Prince Prospero took his knights and ladies to hide in the castle. They sealed off all the doors and windows to cut off the invasion of the red death. However, in the face of the red death, the seemingly invincible castle ultimately failed to protect people's lives. "Churches" serve as the "dwelling place of God" and have the function of communicating between divine power and secular life. During times of war, they also provide some refuge. The meaning of using churches as quarantine zones is self-evident. In *Pandemic*, there is a scene where a "church" serves as an isolation area.

These spaces in the films have similarities in form, emotion, and order: from a formal point of view, these spaces are generally closed spaces. Compared to open spaces, closed spaces compress the characters' range of activity, making the plot more focused; emotionally, these spaces are often associated with actual or metaphorical danger, thus implying urgency, anxiety, fear, and other accompanying emotions; from an order perspective, the closed space formed by quarantine is disconnected from the normal social space order outside of quarantine. "Once a closed space is formed, not only will the social attributes of social individuals be forcibly removed, but the social attributes of the space will also be transformed into other attributes because they are disconnected from the social system. Space production no longer depends on external input, and its internal meaning can begin to be generated." (Yan Huaikang 46-61).

Whether it is in the realm of film and television or real life, a quarantine during a pandemic often takes the form of a state of emergency or depends on a "state of exception" as Giorgio Agamben refers to:

"if the law employs the exception—that is the suspension of law itself as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law." ("State of Exception" 6).

The spatial environment constructed by the quarantine scenes serves not only as the primary backdrop for the narrative of epidemic films, conveying the essence of the film, but also carries the responsibility of scrutinizing societal realities. A space where everyone is at risk, with life hanging in the balance, acts as a mirror to examine the conditions of the world and human nature. It also serves as an experimental ground for hypothetical scenarios in reality.

In real life, the basic and most effective means of blocking the spread of epidemics through non-medical intervention, primarily traditional quarantine, are based on the understanding of the laws of infectious diseases spread by the virus in a "person-to-person" way without vaccines or specific treatments. (Yao Hongwu, Suo Jijiang 806-810) Based on experience, a quarantine must be carried out with certain scales and methods. If it causes terror, it may lead to patients hiding their condition and pose even greater threats to society. Of course, more importantly,

after quarantine, humane treatment and active treatment must be provided. Therefore, as a means of epidemic prevention, a quarantine "is associated with issues related to basic human rights such as the transparency of information, humanitarian treatment, etc., and therefore, it is difficult to view this means in a purely technical manner in modern society" (Qin Xiqing 42-49). Therefore, Quarantine itself is a highly tense issue and is more suitable for the development of dramatic conflicts. In the film *The Flu* the quarantine scenes represent the most typical narrative space, serving not only as crucial narrative junctures in the film but also offering a unique language of cinematography to reflect on societal realities. It is precisely based on these distinctive attributes that the quarantine scenes in "Flu" become essential elements in constructing the film's spatial significance.

From the narrative framework structure of the film, the quarantine scene is not only the most concentrated part of the dramatic conflict in the film, but also an important node in the narrative of the film. Quarantine occupies a very important position in the narrative of the film: in terms of the duration of the film, the film lasts for a total of 121 minutes, and the large-scale military mobilization by the government to force all citizens to be concentrated for quarantine and inspection begins from the 49th minute, and the second half of the film is almost all centered around the quarantine zone. In addition, quarantine is also an important node of the entire plot conflict: before the quarantine begins, the main conflict of the story is the conflict between the virus and humans. The virus attacks humans, who are completely unaware and powerless to resist; from the government's directive mandating the compulsory quarantine of all residents, the film reaches the narrative climax. The primary conflict of the story shifts, portraying the conflict between the government, represented by the South Korean Prime Minister and the U.S. authorities, and the people, symbolized by the South Korean president and medical professor, and the people represented by the South Korean President and medical professors. After the conflict changed, the film adopts parallel montage and cross-cutting montage to advance the story. The two narrative threads mutually influence and serve as cause and effect for each other, each with its distinct narrative context:

Outside the quarantine zone, Professor Yang and government officials represented by the



prime minister argue over the issue of quarantine methods. People inside the quarantine zone are in chaos due to the government's simple and crude control methods.

Those outside the quarantine zone observe the epidemic in Bundang through televised reports, with 35% of people in favor of a lockdown. Government officials struggle to address the public's inquiries and dissatisfaction. Inside the quarantine zone, Kim Mi-reu is diagnosed with the virus, and Kang Ji-koo goes to "treat" the Mi-reu.

Outside the quarantine zone, there is a dispute between the South Korean President, South Korean Prime Minister, and the American government for not releasing uninfected individuals according to a 48-hour agreement. Survivors like Meng Se are found inside the quarantine zone, while Kim In-hae injects Meng Se's serum into Mi-reu. The government's treatment practices, such as the burning of infected bodies, provoke outrage.

From the perspective of film art, the film intricately couples the orchestration and utilization of settings within quarantine scenes with the advancement of the plot, the expression of characters' thoughts and emotions, and the handling of interpersonal relationships. Take the three important quarantine scenes in the film as examples.

In the 51st minute of the film, due to the fact that "once infected, one hundred percent of the people will die and there is no treatment", the South Korean government has decided to withdraw social elites first, then isolate the public, and finally make a public announcement. In this scene, a combination of distance and medium shots is predominantly employed, with an interplay between the two, favoring the use of medium shots. Initially, the film presents an overview of the quarantine area using a distant shot and a bird's eye view, and subsequently employs several consecutive close shots to depict the crowding, chaos, and the terrified expressions of individuals within the isolation zone. Distant shots provide a broad perspective, capturing the environmental ambiance, while close shots enable the audience to clearly see the facial expressions and subtle movements of actors portraying the psychological activities of characters, immersing the audience in the events and fostering a sense of resonance. This series of shots, coupled with a predominantly dark color palette in the background, imparts a serious and austere tone to the quarantine scene. Furthermore, the pervasive white mist in the

quarantine scene creates an urgent and suffocating atmosphere, complementing the narrative of the film.

The second scene takes place in the 106th minute of the film when a riot breaks out in the quarantine zone. The US representative requests the South Korean government cooperate with the US to carry out the "Clean City Plan", which orders the immediate shooting of any person who crosses the yellow warning line. At this point, one side of the yellow warning line is the unarmed Korean people, and the other side is the United States government, issuing orders under the banner of "protecting the entire human race". The film first presents a panoramic view of the interior and exterior of the quarantine area, and then zooms in to give a close-up of the yellow warning line. In general, in order to prevent the image from being too abrupt, a mid range or close range transition is added between the foreground and the close-up. Here, a close-up shot is flashed from a distant perspective, emphasizing the important narrative role of the yellow warning line in the current scene through visual impact.

The third scene is in the 108th minute of the film: Mi-reu runs towards her mother from the quarantine area after seeing her. In order to protect his daughter, Kim In-hae disregards the bullets behind him and rushes towards her from outside the quarantine area. The excited crowd in the quarantine area immediately quiets down when they see this scene, and the soldiers guarding the yellow warning line can't bear to execute the shooting order. Even government officials and American experts who are coldly watching outside the quarantine area are moved. After seeing her mother being shot, Mi-reu opens her weak arms and shouts, "Don't shoot my mother." Subsequently, the crowd in the quarantine area crosses the yellow warning line and joins hands to build a human wall for the mother and daughter.

In this scene, the director used close shot, panoramic, close-up and other forms of filming, as well as overhead shots and Picture in the picture, to bring the audience's emotions to the climax: quarantine as a means of epidemic prevention can effectively control the epidemic, but it cannot block family relationships. In the quarantine scene of *The Flu*, the ruthless measures of epidemic prevention are ultimately dispelled by the warm relationship of the world. But the social, cultural, and political issues under the epidemic still require us to continue exploring.

### **The Quarantine Scene as "State of Exception"**

The global pandemic of Covid-19 has dragged many countries into a state of exception. During the most severe period of the epidemic, measures such as lockdowns, roadblocks, shutdowns, school closures, mask-wearing, 14-day home quarantine, nucleic acid testing and China's epidemic prevention measures such as "health code, travel card" became part of daily life. As a result, the academic community has revisited Carl Schmitt's view that "sovereignty is the decision on a state of exception" (Carl Schmitt 5-11). He proposed that when a country faces an emergency, which cannot be solved with existing legal and conventional political rules and resources, the sovereign can declare a state of exception. By ending the daily order, suspending some laws and even the constitutional system, society operates in an unconventional way to respond to these crises.

The epidemic has necessitated the activation of the "state of exception" operational mode in society. While this is objectively necessary, it raises potential legal concerns and life-political consequences, as highlighted by Italian philosopher and political thinker Giorgio Agamben. As Agamben suggests "If the state of exception's characteristic property is a (total or partial) suspension of the juridical order, how can such a suspension still be contained within it? How can an anomie be inscribed within the juridical order? And if the state of the exception is instead only a de facto situation, and is as such unrelated or contrary to law, how is it possible for the order to contain a lacuna precisely where the decisive situation is concerned? And what is the meaning of this lacuna?" (23) According to Agamben, the introduction of a state of exception as a means of everyday governance poses a risk to democracy and the rule of law. The spatial system constructed by "quarantine" as a means of preventing epidemics became, in the context of Agamben's left-wing ideology, the Nazi concentration camps of the Second World War "if the essence of the camp consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography" ("Homo Sacer" 174). Even

within the framework of Western democratic thought, quarantine as a means of disease prevention inherently departs from the principles of freedom and human rights. The "quarantine" as a means of epidemic prevention, even within the democratic ideological discourse of the Western world, implies a deviation from freedom and human rights. The "isolation" scene in the film *The Flu* serves as a battleground for various ideological conflicts within pandemic films, representing an experimental sample of the real-life "state of exception".

The scene of quarantine in the epidemic movie *The Flu* offers a visual representation of the state of exception. In the film, the virus has spread across the city, causing frequent traffic accidents and overflowing hospitals. In response to this crisis, the South Korean government, as the sovereign power, declared a "state of emergency" (state of exception) and blocked all traffic in the city of Bundang, quarantining supermarkets with outbreaks, and evacuating disease experts and government officials from the affected area. The measures implemented by the South Korean government during this period of quarantine were aimed at minimizing losses and preventing further crisis escalation under the uncontrollable epidemic situation. During this period, the quarantine represents a fact-based "state of emergency,". Whether it was the quarantine of patients in hospitals, the quarantine of supermarkets in Bundang, or the quarantine of the entire city by the South Korean government, it was all intended to protect the majority of uninfected people and ultimately restore a normal pre-epidemic daily life.

The escalation of the epidemic and the failure of government preventive measures have transformed "quarantine" from a "state of emergency" into a "state of exception." These two terms differs from each other. In *State of Exception*, Agamben provides a simple distinction between these two concepts by citing the example of U.S. President Bush during World War II, who continuously claimed himself as the supreme commander of the armed forces, that if the assumption of this qualification directly involves the state of exception, then Bush is trying to create a situation in which the state of emergency becomes the norm, and the distinction between peace and war will no longer be possible(33). The "state of emergency" is a necessary condition for the "state of exception," and the latter represents a situation where power suspends the judiciary and the subject.

As the epidemic developed, following the advice of American experts, the South Korean government forced all residents of Bundang to be isolated and tested, and provided an implementation plan, that anyone in Bundang should be quarantine as a subject of infection management. First, identify the infected patients with erythema through visual inspection. The infection status of others will be confirmed through PCR. Those who are asymptomatic after 48 hours and have negative results from PCR testing can leave the quarantine center. However, before the implementation of the quarantine order, the South Korean government blocked all wireless services in the entire Bundang area to control public opinion, without any prior notice before the concentrated quarantine. This rash move led to four problems within the quarantine zone: (1) unscientific epidemic prevention, exacerbating the spread of the virus due to a lack of differentiation between "infected" and "uninfected"; (2) insufficient preparation, failure to provide adequate quarantine space for "quarantined persons" to meet their basic survival needs ("no water or toilets"), and the use of forceful repression in the face of public questioning and interrogation; (3) lack of fairness and security, with government officials enjoying privileges and only wealthy people being able to leave the quarantine zone, and; (4) the trampling of human rights, with infected patients unable to receive effective assistance and some being sent directly to underground burial sites.

Consequently, when the sovereign initiates the "state of exception," possessing temporary decision-making authority and deploying violence, we are confronted with the following inquiries: Who should constrain the power of the sovereign? By what standards should the sovereign determine who is to be quarantined? How should the boundaries of quarantine be delineated? What criteria determine the duration of quarantine? How can the rights of those quarantine be ensured? When a nation loses its autonomy, who should assume the role of the sovereign? Throughout the comprehensive considerations surrounding quarantine how should political, scientific, ethical, medical, and economic factors be prioritized, and what balance should be maintained among them?

In the case of *The Flu*, cinema takes inspiration from real life, even as it provides an experimental field for speculation and social critique. The deep thoughts and conflicting

struggles triggered by quarantine are not only reflected on the screen but also in the writings and debates of the Western radical left. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Western radical left collectively reflected on the government's control measures such as lockdowns and quarantine. Three distinct voices have emerged, represented by Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Roberto Esposito.

At the early stage of the pandemic outbreak, the Chinese government decisively implemented control measures such as lockdowns and quarantine, and became one of the earliest countries to successfully control the epidemic. At the end of 2020, Italy was deeply embroiled in an epidemic crisis. Giorgio Agamben published three editorials in various publications and websites, including the renowned leftist newspaper, *Il Manifesto*. These works were titled "The State of Exception Brought About By an Unjustified Emergency" ("Lo stato d'eccezione provocato da un'emergenza immotivata" ) , "A Reflection on the Plague" ("Riflessioni sulla peste" ) and "On Infection" ("Contagio" ) . His argument was that "the current epidemic is no different from the annual outbreak of influenza, and the government's control measures are overly strict, such vague and uncertain clauses allow the state of exception to spread reasonably to all regions. People crave safety, so they accept restrictions on personal freedom imposed by the government" ("Lo stato d' eccezione" ) ; however, it is precisely the government that generates this desire in people and takes measures to satisfy it. "The government's regulations transformed every individual into a potential "oiler," he argued, just as anti-terrorism laws assume that every citizen is, in fact, a potential terrorist in both fact and law" ( "On Infection" ).

At the time, of course, Agamben did not realize the seriousness of the Covid-19. As a result, some scholars, represented by Nancy and Paolo F. Daquez, reflected on and criticized Agamben's remarks. Nancy responded to Agamben with "A Viral Exception" ("Eccezione virale") and "A Much Too Human Virus" ("Un trop humain virus"): arguing that the use of such measures cannot be blamed solely on the Italian government because "such exceptions have actually become a rule in such a world... Governments are just pathetic enforcers." (Jean-Luc Nancy "A Viral Exception"). "In China, people are already in the market and the anti-epidemic

order. And in Europe, people are still stuck in disorder between countries and between breathing... The coronavirus is a product of globalization in every way" (Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Much Too Human Virus*). In "Filosofia e virus: le farneticazioni di Giorgio Agamben", Daquez's offered a more radical critique and ridiculed Agamben by describing him as 'superstitious and anti-science,' providing a 'terrible philosophy,' emphasizing that what we need now are mandatory measures..

Esposito, through his biopolitics theory, proposes a third perspective: immunity is necessary but should not be excessive. "Immunity is necessary, and I do not envision it as a conspiracy of the state or an act of infringement, as some might. However, naturally, just like the immune system, if this defense exceeds its limits, restrains freedom, and hinders various forms of relationships, then immunity might turn into an autoimmune disease, attacking the body that should be protected. In the sense of safeguarding life against external dangers and violence, the immune system is necessary. However, when immunity undergoes excessive development, the biopolitics centered around the immune system can transform into a politics of death (thanatopolitics). Therefore, we need to prevent the invasion of external viruses while also avoiding excessive measures in disease prevention." (Esposito "La politica") "Although emergency measures have been employed to address pandemics for a long time, they are not absolutely necessary. Pushing politics into a state of exception will ultimately undermine the power balance cherished by democratic nations." (Esposito "On Pandemics") If the human immune system is to function normally, it must maintain a delicate balance. As Tom Frost puts it: "Esposito's positive form of biopolitics stands in opposition to Agamben's attempt to deactivate biopolitics and found a life as common use and form".

However, with the development of the epidemic, Agamben and his ideas have come to a turning point: on the one hand, long-term and large-scale lockdowns have led to the cessation of business, workers stopping work, hospitals overloaded, and local finances greatly in deficit... This is a severe test for any country. On the other hand, the iteration and mutation of the virus have gradually reduced its mortality and morbidity rates. In this context, 13 countries in the European Union first issued a joint statement, proposing that the 'state of exception' during the

Covid-19 pandemic should abide by the rule of law, and that member states "emergency measures should be limited to strict and necessary areas, proportionate and temporary" ("Joint Statement on the Principles of the Rule of Law in Times of Covid-19"). In China, the prevention and control measures for Covid-19 were lifted on January 8, 2023.<sup>④</sup> French philosopher Bruno Latour pointed out in an interview that this plague will be a test field for biopolitics: "the model in which the population is managed by networks will be revived and expanded globally" (Latour "La crise"). Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han pointed out in an interview that "as Agamben worried, the state of exception will become the norm, which Covid-19 has achieved what terrorism did not" (Byung-Chul Han "Die Welt"). Lan Jiang, a professor of philosophy at Nanjing University in China, also pointed out that 'under the auspices of digital technology and biotechnology, life politics predicted by Foucault, Agamben, and Esposito is gradually becoming reality worldwide (1-9).

The ongoing debate sparked by the novel coronavirus has led to further contemplation of biopolitics. In the shadow of the pandemic, there is a reexamination of the essence of biopolitics, prompting a reconsideration of power dynamics between the government and individuals. Prolonged lockdown measures have facilitated the widespread application of digital technology in social management, simultaneously raising concerns about privacy rights and information security. The development and administration of vaccines bring hope in the fight against the virus, but they also pose challenges to bioethical considerations and social equity. At this intersection, there is a need to contemplate how to balance public safety with individual freedoms and how to construct a more inclusive and just biopolitical system.

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<sup>④</sup>Chinese National Health Commission also issued a notice on December 26, 2022. With the approval of the State Council, as of January 8, 2023, the measures for the prevention and control of Class A infectious diseases stipulated in the Law of the China on the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases against the Covid-19 will be lifted; the Covid-19 is no longer included in the quarantine infectious disease management stipulated in the Frontier Health and Quarantine Law of the China.



### Reflections on the Quarantine Narrative of *The Flu*

Fredric Jameson argues that cultural texts serve as allegorical modes for the entire society, "Film-that medium will shortly become the hegemonic formal expression of late capitalist society". ("The Political Unconscious" 160) Jameson imparts legitimacy and seriousness to the existence of film, considering it a primary allegorical form of late capitalist society. This prompts us to release the "political unconscious" obscured by ideological representations within film narratives. Applying Jameson's theory of "allegory" to analyze the *The Flu*, it is not difficult to discern, this film showcases the internal debates and power struggles of the country's management through the theme of quarantine, which reflects the discontent of the Korean people towards US hegemony as well as the determination to defend national sovereignty and independence. German film theorist, Siegfried Kracauer, observes that "movies reflect the psychological state of a country more directly than any other art medium" (11). Throughout its history, South Korea has been invaded and ruled by neighboring countries countless times. Even today, amidst its rapid economic development, South Korea remains in a delicate relationship with North Korea, Japan and the United States. This perpetuates a sense of helplessness and insecurity in the national psyche of the South Korean people.

*The Flu* vividly expresses the public's distrust of the government and their yearning for independence and autonomy. In the film, the U.S. military stationed in South Korea is able to directly command the South Korean Prime Minister and even decide the life and death of the country. In the 73rd minute of the film, in order to facilitate their actions, the South Korean Prime Minister and the U.S. military forcibly mobilize both the infected and uninfected people and concentrate them in the base for selection and handling, thus exacerbating the epidemic. Afterwards, in order to limit the epidemic to the area of Bundang, They breach their commitment by failing to release the uninfected individuals within the stipulated 48-hour timeframe. This behavior thoroughly angers the isolated people, causing those who are already in a life crisis to lose their trust in the government and ignite riots and rebellions. The civilian resistance against the government indicates the imminent collapse of social order.

Faced with the riots, the U.S. insists on using force for quarantine, and even in the situation

where there could be surviving carriers of antibodies who might receive treatment, they still insists on implementing the "city clean-up plan". However, the South Korean President is unwilling to give up any hope of saving Bundang. He confronts the U.S. using South Korean ground-to-air missiles to prevent their combat bomber plan. Seeing the President's firm stance, the Prime Minister remains silent, and the U.S. choses to compromise. Finally, the "city clean-up plan" is lifted, and the government dispatches medical teams to actively treat the citizens while a treatment is developed. The entire city returns to its previous order. The film uses the image of a young, brave President who is concerned about the people to reconcile the national emotional rift caused by the disorder of governmental authority. Through the quarantine scene, the movie transforms the battle of Bundang's people against the epidemic into South Korea's "war of independence," and expresses the determination of the South Korean people to defend national sovereignty and independence through the President's strong attitude towards the U.S. military stationed in South Korea.

In the film, the representation of the quarantine not only refers to the policy of government but also interrogates the unjust use of power in various ways. For instance, at the 39th minute of the film, the contrast between the living conditions of ordinary people and social elites during the quarantine implicitly criticizes the privileged class in society: due to the epidemic getting out of control, the government first uses helicopters to evacuate government officials, social elites and their families out of the city and then announces the epidemic to the public. Meanwhile, ordinary people are forcibly locked in supermarkets without any prior notice and transferred to unsafe quarantine areas. Additionally, two other shots use subtle symbols to reveal the class confrontation: a panoramic shot of an iron fence at the 45th minute represents the means by which the government prevents the spread of the virus as well as symbolizes the gap between ordinary people and the privileged class. Dr. Kim In-hae, representing the "social elites", is able to leave Bundang by helicopter with her daughter, and even applies for a seat for firefighter Kang Joo-ki to leave Bundang, while ordinary people are quarantined on the other side of the iron fence. At the critical moment of life and death, Kang Ji-koo relinquishes In an effort to rescue those trapped in the supermarket within the epidemic area, he seizes the

opportunity to provide Kim and her daughter with his car keys and attempts to breach the iron fence using a fire hydrant.

In the 102nd minute of the film, the director employs a close-up shot to emphasize the significance of the "yellow cordon" during the impending execution of the "city clean-up plan." This cinematic technique highlights a symbolic divide: on one end of the cordon are the unarmed South Korean citizens facing the threat of the epidemic, while on the opposite end stand the South Korean prime minister and the seemingly apathetic and self-interested U.S. government. The latter issues directives under the guise of "respecting the will of all Korean people" and "protecting the entire human race." This visual and symbolic representation serves as a commentary on the power dynamics and ethical considerations associated with governmental decisions during public health crises.

In addition, after people are concentrated in quarantine areas, priority is given to civil servants for examination, food is also picked up and distributed to civil servants first, money can be given out of the quarantine area, and Kim In-hae, as a doctor, uses his position to forcibly keep his infected daughter with her and inject her with survivor's serum...Ultimately, the salvation of the entire population in Bundang was attributed to In-hae injecting Mi-reu with serum, providing her with the necessary antibodies. However, children infected with the virus who lacked a doctor-mother did not have the opportunity for a cure. All of this reflects social injustices, such as described by Susan Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor*: "The fact that disease is associated with the poor—that is, from the perspective of the privileged in society, the otherness in society—in an imaginary connection also reinforces the imaginary association between disease and foreign countries, that is, with foreign lands, often primitive regions" (124-125). In *The Flu*, "poor people" refer to the majority of ordinary Korean citizens who do not have privileges. Moreover, in the context of a global pandemic, the representation of "poor people" also alludes to those who are deeply engulfed in the crisis: the marginalized and voiceless citizens of underdeveloped countries.

The narrative of quarantine in *The Flu* also triggers reflections on the relationship between fact and value. At the 32nd minute of the film, the first conflict between facts and values occurs:

before the source of the virus is confirmed, Professor Yang infers that it is a contagious virus and proposes an immediate quarantine of Bundang. In a government-issued response, Korean officials ridicule Yang's views: "Bundang is only 15 kilometers away from Seoul, and there are as many international events held there every year as in Seoul. How can you make such irresponsible remarks?" The professor offers a factual judgment based on his professional knowledge and expertise: this is a contagious virus that can be transmitted to humans. By contrast, the officials, based on their status and position, make a value judgment: Bundang should not be quarantined.

At the 51st minute of the film, the second conflict between facts and values arises in response to the quarantine plan: American experts and the Korean government propose gathering all people in one place for screening and treatment, but Professor Yang opposes the idea. Here the professor presents a scientific view: a gathering of people will lead to a larger-scale infection. The government officials offer a value judgment that, in consideration of the safety of all Korean people, Bundang should be quarantined. These are conflicts between "is" and "should", natural sciences and ideology, and facts and values. Natural science pursues facts, and the knowledge of facts comes from experience, and there is a distinction between true and false. Ideology emphasizes value, value is not derived from experience, it does not matter whether it is true or not. Facts and values should not be confused. In the face of the major public health event of the influenza virus outbreak, Professor Yang assumes the role of a scientist, acknowledging that the domain of science is confined to addressing the question of "what," leaving unanswered inquiries concerning "how it should be."

Returning to the discourse surrounding the radical left in the Western context amid the pandemic: In the early days of the Covid-19, Agamben's arrogant and paranoid rhetoric served to undermine his theory of "biopolitics" because the value judgments he presented were not grounded in fact. In response to criticism, Agamben defended himself, stating that he was not "expressing an opinion on the seriousness of the epidemic, but questioning its ethical and political consequences" (Giorgio Agamben "Chiarimenti"). However, with the advent of vaccines, a decrease in mortality rates, and the economy operating under excessive strain,

Agamben's statements have gradually undergone practical validation. His value judgments align with basic facts, leading to a transformation in the criticism against him. Here we would like to return to the social, cultural and political issues surrounding the introduction of a quarantine as a means of epidemic prevention. A quarantine is by no means just a technical issue for a modern society. Latour's account of the process of confirming viruses may help us consider the issue of quarantine procedures in a broader context: "Who judges these viruses? Of course, biologists do, but there are also a large group of people... laboratories conducting research, farmers conducting investigations, consumers feeling fearful, veterinarians identifying symptoms, epidemiologists analyzing their statistical data, journalists digging around, cows panicking, sheep shivering" (175-239). In the context of Covid-19, society is a network, and thus every decision and implementation of policies will affect every node in this network. It is not appropriate to simply evaluate and implement a quarantine policy based on a binary opposition of facts and values. An overemphasis on factual judgment—at the expense of value judgments—can lead to quarantine policies and procedures that fail to comfort humans in the face of illness and death. However, an excessive emphasis on value judgments—one that neglects known facts and scientific evidence—leads to chaos. Bridging the gap between facts and values is crucial to the effective development and implementation of a quarantine policy and procedures.

### **Conclusion**

The preventive measure of quarantine involves the domains of medicine, law, politics, and beyond. The inherent tensions within it make the quarantine scenes in epidemic films crucial narrative spaces for portraying dramatic conflicts. Although introducing the quarantine scene in epidemic films may seem to narrow the narrative space, it actually concentrates the storyline and accentuates dramatic conflicts, providing an effective approach for interpreting the film. The movie "Flu" utilizes the quarantine scene to showcase dramatic conflicts, advance the plot, express character emotions, and reveal the film's underlying themes: South Korea's desire for independence, questions about the unreasonable use of power, and reflections on the

relationship between facts and values. Films serve as a societal "mirror," and as a popular art form, the virus imagery constructed by films reflects the global context of virus and political conflicts. Films also act as a societal "driver," and comprehending the narrative significance of the quarantine scenes in the movie contributes to a proper understanding of the preventive measure of quarantine in the context of real-life epidemics. This understanding, in turn, aids in actively promoting the establishment of societal order in the face of the ongoing pandemic.

Through the resolution of the crisis in the "quarantine" scene, the film juxtaposes memories of the past with today's world disasters, rekindling people's yearning for an ideal life. The outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic further demonstrates the necessity of building a community with a shared future for humanity. On the one hand, the rapid transmission, wide scope of infection, and difficulty of prevention and control caused a serious threat to the lives and health of people worldwide. Global public health security faces severe challenges, and the political, economic, social, ecological, and other fields worldwide are all impacted. On the other hand, during the Covid-19 pandemic, governments of many countries, international organizations, and individuals participated in global actions against the disease, including mutual assistance amongst countries worldwide, sharing scientific data and technological advancements, research and development of vaccines and effective drugs, and sharing of advanced experience and treatment plans. The anti-epidemic practice based on the notion of a community with a shared future for humanity unified the peoples of different countries in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, alleviating the medical pressure on assisted countries or regions, and making contributions to global public health security. However, there have also been some negative voices and negative practices. Some politicians, while countries are working hard to control the spread of the virus, attempt to tie the virus to political issues, and name the virus "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus". This behavior seriously hinders the progress of global anti-epidemic efforts. As Slavoj Žižek said, "Now is not the time to feel ashamed or be blamed, it is the time, in the face of the virus, to gather courage and patience and fight."<sup>(1)</sup> In the face of the virus, humanity is not divided by nationality, race, wealth, or power, especially against the backdrop of globalization. Esposito, through her research on immune tolerance

mechanisms, seeks the possibility of positive biopolitics. It "entails that we move concepts out from the closed off and exclusive logic of immunity to the open and inclusive one of community such that immunity refers to contagion and community to difference. This shift requires from us to conceive community no longer as something to which we return or something to which we aspire. Community is neither origin nor a telos, neither goal nor an end, and neither presupposition nor destination. Instead, community is the condition, both singular and plural, of our complete existence. ("Community, Immunity, Biopolitics" 11). This inspires us to foster a sense of a human destiny community to collaboratively fight against the pandemic and jointly build a global community of health for all.

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