The Pandemic as a Narrative Resource: Content and discourse analysis of two audiovisual products

La pandemia como recurso narrativo. Análisis de contenido y discurso de dos audiovisuales

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ABSTRACT

This text aims to show how the COVID-19 pandemic created new narratives that reflect everyday issues involving the world in one way or another. Furthermore, it shows how different cinematographic resources and emerging narratives allow for the telling of real and emotional stories, with a sarcastic and ironic edge, which help re-evaluate human relationships. The theoretical framework of this article focuses on cinematic narratives, genres, and cinema during the pandemic, and the advent of streaming platforms. This study is carried out through a qualitative methodology based on content analysis of the film *Together* and the BBC television series *Staged*. The study found that these two audiovisual products reliably portray what happened during the era of pandemic-driven stay-at-home orders. It also found Zoom to be an innovative resource for narrating these series. This platform became popular for working from home and, in this case, the program uses it intelligently. Finally, by way of conclusion, this article suggests that cinematographic resources, realistic scripts, and the working of narratives give the entertainment industry, particularly cinema and television, opportunities to create new content starting from historical moments.

Keywords: Film, TV, pandemics, streaming, COVID-19

RESUMEN

El siguiente texto tiene por objetivo mostrar cómo, a partir de la pandemia derivada del COVID-19, se crearon nuevas narrativas en las que se reflejan temas cotidianos que de una u otra manera involucran al mundo. Además, se muestra cómo a través de distintos recursos cinematográficos y narrativas emergentes es posible contar historias reales y emotivas, con un corte sarcástico e irónico que sirven para reevaluar las relaciones humanas. El marco teórico que abarca este artículo se enfoca en las narrativas cinematográficas, los géneros, el cine durante la pandemia y el advenimiento de las plataformas de streaming. Dicho estudio se realiza a través de una metodología con enfoque cualitativo basado en el análisis de contenido a la película: Together y del programa de televisión originario de la cadena BBC: Staged. Como resultado, se tiene que estos dos productos audiovisuales logran retratar de forma fidedigna lo sucedido durante la época del enclaustramiento; además, se encuentra que un recurso innovador para relatar la serie fue Zoom, plataforma que se popularizó para el trabajo en casa y que, en este caso, el programa utiliza inteligentemente. Finalmente, una de las principales conclusiones es que, gracias a los recursos cinematográficos, a guiones realistas y a la forma en que se trabaja la narrativa, la industria del entretenimiento, en particular el cine y la televisión tienen oportunidades de crear nuevos contenidos a partir de momentos históricos.

Palabras clave: *Cine, TV, pandemia, stream, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

Cinema and television have gone through a series of historical moments that have changed audiovisual discourse and its understanding. Concretely, in March 2020, citizens around the world were subject to stay-at-home orders due to the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19). As a result, film production began to be rethought, as did story-telling styles. In other words, another approach to portraying confinement, coexistence, and human relationships was introduced, leading to the narratological reconfiguration of certain stories.

The above inspired content analysis of a representative television program and a film to understand the transformation of audiovisual narratives and their transformation and adaptation to the sometimes uncertain times that human beings face; in this case, we focus on the pandemic, a turning point in history. Of note, both products focus on changes in human relationships during confinement and the social, family, love, and work-related repercussions.

This study analyzes the television series, *Staged*, created by Simon Evans and Phin Glynn 2020/2021, and the feature film *Together* (Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, 2021). As subsequent paragraphs will demonstrate, television has achieved a narrative and technical transformation similar to that of cinematography; hence, two different products were chosen that address similar topics in different ways.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cinema refers to all films of any style. In short, it is the visualization of reality in a singular work. Television series and feature films are differentiated by their production; that is why stories are repeated, and the public returns to them (Guigues and Leutrat, 2013).

CINEMATOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE

In reductionist terms, cinematography is a language, a means of communication to legitimately express a large register of needs and objectives, from the most complex to the most trivial; moreover, it is an industry, commerce, art, and technique (Feldman, 2012).

The most significant characteristics focus on the rupture of patterns, production methods, narrative structures, expressive language, capture techniques, and interpretative modalities, which are modified to more directly and authentically attract the public. The camera can occupy the place of one protagonist or another, and then alternate between points of views, i.e., that of those who play a character and that of those who direct the film.

Audiovisual narrative is dominated by scenes, which last the duration of a projection, and sequences, also known as a set of shots with narrative unity, which are separated or joined by transitions. The flow of scenes and sequences occurs according to an interplay of causes and effects. As for the narrative, it focuses on a main character or a clearly characterized pair of main characters and confronts conflicting situations (Vanoye and Lété, 2018).

At the same time, as cinema has taken over, the structure of TV has changed, especially in productions that demand higher quality. A clear example of this is the emergence of different streaming platforms, which, as the statistics presented in subsequent paragraphs will demonstrate, have become the new cinema. This forces the film industry to look for new elements, mainly in the form of blockbuster films and huge projection screens (Feldman, 2012).

When studying audiovisual products, dialogues are another very significant point to consider. Realistic ones seem to be more cinematic. The productions analyzed here, *Staged* and *Together*, have realistic, everyday dialogues that are more spoken than acted, and convey naturalness, common language, simplicity, and clarity. Although it is not precisely dialogue, improvised speech can be included in this category. In this case, the artist makes up their lines with a certain degree of spontaneity and naturalness (Martin, 2018).

AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES

"Narratology" is a recent term, however, it is not an entirely new discipline. Reflection on narrative is a central concern for those who scrutinize the seventh art—and now TV series—from all its angles. Following Christian Metz, the study of narratives and codes overlaps in such a way that research noticeably advances from one to the other in a periodic and pendular movement (Gadreault and Jost, 2015).

At the same time, narrative montage narrates an action, especially the relationships between different scenes or sequences, leading to understanding audiovisual products as a meaningful totality. Montage acts as a whole; no single shot has a direct function or is perceived as such except on the plane of dialectical meaning. This resource offers a vision of the world (Martin, 2018).

Both *Staged* and *Together* follow a linear montage, which refers to the organization of a product containing a single action exposed in a series of scenes that have a logical and chronological order. It is considered the simplest because there is no systematic parallelism and the camera moves freely from one place to another according to the needs of the action, always respecting temporal succession.

GENRES

It is essential to talk about genres in audiovisual productions, as they organize the distribution, presentation, and reception of productions. The prevailing idea about genres is that they were established overnight. In other words, certain attributes were already attached to them; however, it is impossible to assign them a timeless definition, as they are nourished by varying cinematographic and/or television productions (Guigues and Leutrat, 2013).

Another point of view reveals genres as a reflection of socioeconomic reality where their study begins with testimonies and they function as a horizon of expectations. Therefore, their establishment contributes to the homogenization of audiovisual narratives (Altman, 2020).
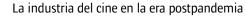
Considering the above, the following vignettes describe the main subgenres that the analyzed productions belong to. Of note, that this description is based on what Ayala (2012) points out; thus, both *Staged* and *Together* can be categorized as follows:

» **Dehumanizing apocalypse:** A form of profound discourse. Action is not determined by the character but by the situation they are experiencing.

» **Ambiguous comedy:** A recycling-surpassing substitute for the everyday world thanks to high comedy. It reveals unforeseen paths for the humiliations that unite the characters and exhibits the opposite of what they intend amid cruelty.

» **Mutable comedy:** Simple, secret humor. It runs the risk of appearing simplistic and is based on the unspeakable content of situations, including real confrontations or dramatic cataclysms.

» **Anhedonic comedy:** A philosophical and radical reflection on happiness, it brutally and elegantly contradicts some form of nonsense without denying it, because the only lasting happiness is nothing more than jovially dealing with one's misfortunes.

» **Self-irritating comedy:** Based on sarcasm and malice, it goes beyond melodrama or farce; a kind of "dramedy" that fuses wise sentimental comedy and heartbreaking self-mocking drama.

» **Depressing marital drama:** Explicit and challenging; an austere scenic piece with a minimalist accent, it is a puzzle of isolating shots. This genre has redefined the marital bond as a simple wall against loneliness and inner insecurity that has nothing to do with love or passion.

» **Intimism (quintessential and paralyzed):** It lays bare the vulnerable conscience, delicate feelings, immortal torn dialogues, and moods produced by the lack of communication. Paralyzed intimacy takes place in a visual flow; it captures the ghostly images of a time that is stationary and repetitive, where everything is simultaneously the same and different; it does not seek to hide the seriousness of the despair that interrupts normal daily life.

» **Informulable melodrama:** Suggests an unstable relationship that is a painful and powerful nexus, a delicate tie of complicity.

» **Bipolar romance:** Describes the sultry intimacies of a seemingly harmonious and perfect relationship between two characters. It manages and decomposes love, which drifts into cruelty in the most significant moments; it has a dense tone and rhetoric that includes aggresively pursuing the interior through very close shots. Finally, it focuses on irony.

Based on what can be observed in the audiovisual products studied and the literature consulted, *Staged* and *Together* belong to the aforementioned genres. They also have a symbolic interpretation, which consists of works that, while maintaining a realistic tone and building a plausible world, allow for a literal reading of the story. Both audiovisual products focus on a full, motivated, continuous chain of actions or the psychological construction of the characters.

CINEMA DURING THE PANDEMIC: CHARACTERISTICS

Confinement forced movie theaters to close. When not working or carrying out some other primary activity, viewers began to consume audiovisual productions on a variety of devices via streaming. This modality became a huge advantage for both television and film, as well as for the audience and the creation of new audiovisual narratives.

Digital devices help films and programs reach a larger audience, and content can be consumed through different platforms, such as Netflix, HBO Max, Disney+, Hulu, Apple TV+, Amazon Prime, and more (Sanchez, 2021).

At the same time, the audiovisual entertainment industry changed. People dedicated to the creation of film and TV confirmed that, to save money, speed up production, and maintain the pace of their work, they used resources available at home, such as videoconferences, constantly cleaned equipment, masks, and other daily precautions.

Another change in the industry was related to the financial support, almost two months' worth, that both personnel and independent companies had, in addition to the development of more specific shooting plans and controlled gauges. Social distancing had major repercussions on the way dramatic scenes and personal interactions were filmed (Fulford, n.d.).

CONSUMPTION HABITS DURING THE PANDEMIC

This topic is included because, in one way or another, these are themes that are reflected in Staged and Together. In this case, consumption habits refer to online shopping, home office, socializing through videoconferencing, and, of course, consuming content exclusively released on digital platforms (Tuñón and Gambari, 2021).

Audience demand led platforms to create different audiovisual products to satisfy their audiences' needs. Although it was already taking place, this factor was boosted even more by the pandemic. The main consequence thereof is that audiovisual language has been transformed and storytelling methods have become increasingly diverse (Labelium, 2020).

To provide context regarding connectivity, it is worth mentioning that, in Mexico, staying connected on social networks was the most frequent activity (71%), followed by streaming movies (67%), and watching videos on platforms (66%) and similar services (Cortés, 2022). In addition, 22% of the Mexican population had a subscription to four or more streaming platforms, while 42% of citizens opted for a digital streaming platform (Gutiérrez, 2020).

PRINCIPAL STREAMING PLATFORMS AND STATISTICS

First of all, it is important to understand that streaming platforms send content that can be played as it reaches a device, using technology known as progressive download, which uses Internet servers to distribute multimedia files. Therefore, this kind of service had greater acceptance during the pandemic because people could play content from anywhere via the Internet or by downloading (Marquines and Añazco, 2014).

Most streaming platforms became the big screen of audiovisual content during confinement; While this phenomenon began in early 2010, their use was multiplied by the pandemic, evidenced by a 75.1% increase in paid subscribers among the main platforms between 2019 and today. Before confinement, there were 320 million customers, and this number increased to more than 560 million worldwide (Calderon, 2021). Traffic on digital platforms increased up to 70% during the pandemic, which led to the imminent change in audiovisual paradigms and narratives, as is the case of the series and film analyzed in this study. In Mexico, the streaming platforms Netflix, Claro Video, Amazon Prime, and YouTube had the greatest reach in 2020 (Gutiérrez, 2020).

However, it is also of note that, faced with this new way of producing content and telling stories, the streaming market consisted of only a few companies,

among which the most important were Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, Disney Plus, and Apple TV. Netflix was the leader, with 183 million subscribers worldwide in the first four months of 2020, followed by Amazon Prime, with 150 million, and HBO MAX, with 140 million users. Disney+ and Apple TV+ gathered 50 and 33 million subscribers, respectively (Godoy, 2020).

While this hyper-consumption may have derived from the pandemic, this does not mean that this approach to platforms will decrease post-pandemic. There will inevitably be some moderation, but the trend toward streaming is a sure thing. Approximately one-third of all content consumption is currently done through streaming platforms, but by 2030, it will increase to more than 80%, according to specialists.
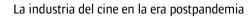
STUDY

This analysis uses a qualitative methodology specifically focused on content analysis of both audiovisual products. Thus, the essential aspects of the series are as follows:

- » **Name:** Staged (2020-2021)
- » **Seasons:** 2
- » 1st season, June 10-24, 2020
- » 2nd season, January 2-26, 2021
- » **Length:** 20 to 22 minutes per episode
- » **Country of origin:** United Kingdom
- » **IMDB Rating:** 8.6, Rotten Tomatoes: 89%
- » **Genres:** Comedy and drama
- » **Broadcast:** BBC One / BBC iPlayer / Hulu (USA)
- » **Episodes:** Fourteen (6 in the first season, 8 in the second)

- » **Creators:** Simon Evans & Phin Glynn
- » **Cast:** David Tenant, Michael Sheen, Simon Evans, Georgia Tennant, Anna Lundberg
- » **Synopsis:** David Tennant and Michael Sheen, playing themselves, star as two actors whose West End (England) play "Six Characters in Search of an Author" is suspended due to the pandemic. However, the director of the play, Simon West (also playing himself), convinces them to rehearse via Zoom, the videoconference tool through which the entire series is narrated. But everything becomes complicated because of the number of distractions typical of confinement, such as boredom, monotony, work from home, homeschooling, and the characters' egos. The second season tells of how this successful play is reproduced in the United States. However, because they are not famous enough in America, the original actors are not part of the cast. This leads to a series of confusions and dialogues with different figures to find out who will replace them (Rotten Tomatoes, 2022).

Below is a brief review of each episode, paraphrased from information obtained on IMDB:

- » **E.1:** Cachu Hwch. Two actors, David and Michael, are in the process of presenting a play, but everything is put on hold due to the pandemic. However, the production is a great opportunity for its director, Simon West, who convinces the cast to rehearse via videoconference.
- » **E.2:** Up to No Good. Rehearsals are about to begin, but the director disappears. Both Michael and David take advantage of the time to not rehearse. However, their free time is limited, as David's wife Georgia must deliver her novel, and he must take care of their children. Meanwhile, Michael has a problem with the law.

» **E.3:** Who the F#!k is Michael Sheen? An actor who was initially involved in the play returns and complicates the production. Meanwhile, at home, Georgia sells her novel, and Michael is blackmailed by his neighbor.

» **E.4:** Bara Birth. Michael and David do not trust each other, so Jo, played by Nina Sonsaya, seeks to control the situation. Meanwhile, Michael's problems with his neighbor continue.

» **E.5:** Ulysses. Simon summons a friend to try to convince David and Michael to trust him. David tries to play a suitable role as a father at home while his wife finishes the draft of her screenplay.

» **E.6:** The Cookie Jar. Jo leans on someone with experience to make amends between Michael and David. Georgia shares David's work without his knowledge. Meanwhile, Michael tries to solve the problem with his neighbor.

The following is a brief synopsis of the second season, paraphrased from the same source:

» **E.1:** Saddle up Sheen! Michael and David are hurt because someone they admire does not like their work. David and Michael's plans are canceled because of changes in UK travel restrictions.

» **E.2:** Long time, no see. David and Michael are dismayed as they learn that the play in the United States will continue without them at the helm. They are also upset by Simon's success.

» **E.3:** The Dirty Mochyns. David and Michael have the opportunity to sabotage the show. David becomes melancholic when he discovers what people think of him. However, Michael is very happy, as he enjoys greater public approval.

» **E.4:** Woofty Doofty, David. Certain consequences arise as a result of David and Michael's behavior. Meanwhile, Georgia, Anna, and Lucy talk about a charity play they will be participating in.

» **E.5:** The Warthog and the Mongoose: Pt. I. The actors are confused about having to read the script with people who might be part of the new cast. The sustained interactions make them uneasy and upset, so Simon tries to patch things up. Meanwhile, Georgia organizes her charity team.

» **E.6:** The Warthog and the Mongoose: Pt. II. The theatrical play is in danger. Simon receives bad news and tries to get David and Michael to work together. As a result, the two actors are offered a new perspective on their friendship.

» **E.7:** The Loo Recluse. David and Michael discover that the studio has already hired their replacements. When they find out who will play them, they become angry again because they each have a history with the actor taking their place, one known and one unknown.

» **E.8:** Until they got home. David and Michael prepare to leave their homes; David must return to work and Michael considers his options for going to New York.

The television series' narrative "takes advantage" of confinement by having those involved interact via Zoom. In fact, this platform is the only means of communication between the two main actors. The dialogues are carefully orchestrated, and, at times, the actors seem to improvise their speech. From this space of confinement, the characters seem to divert attention from the central theme, the staging. Feelings run high, and the actors talk about everyday issues typical of the pandemic era, specifically, their relationships with their wives, the future of theater in the United Kingdom, panic buying, children, and new purchasing and entertainment habits they have found.

Another situation that the series takes advantage of has to do with scenery. Although using external locations is impossible, the different rooms in the actors' homes diversify the scenography. This element better expresses the feelings of confinement. Shots of England appear throughout the episodes, with empty streets, no cars, and no people on the avenues. Such resources often serve as transitions.

Given that everything takes place through Zoom, the camera is static, which could be interpreted as the use of close-ups. During the episodes, different actors and actresses interact with David Tennant and Michael Sheen through this videoconferencing platform.

The roles are properly assigned, and that is where the narrative lies, i.e., in natural and organic dialogues. There, they leave aside their characters and understand each other as people. They experience a twist in their lives, and their feelings are exposed before the camera.

This program can be categorized as an ambiguous anhedonic comedy and drama because the narrative has a sarcastic and ironic tone, while it also uses dialogue to visualize certain idiosyncrasies common to the United Kingdom's population, how citizens express themselves, and their way of life. This is exposed throughout the two seasons in which, with a properly plotted script, the characters debate, laugh, get angry, and have endless emotions as a result of being confined. And this is enhanced because everything happens on a single stage, which, in this case, is the actors' homes.

It is also important to mention that a kind of narratological novelty lies in the fact that the characters communicate via Zoom, and the interaction between those who are part of the program takes place through teleconferences. Therefore, there are no cameras on the set, and all the action takes place through what the actors' computer cameras capture. It is interesting to observe and analyze how a narrative is achieved with the characters' computer cameras, where everything is done remotely. This is somewhat unconventional, relying on digital technology to engage in dialogues on the topics mentioned previously.

On the other hand, the specifications of the film *Together* are as follows:

» **Length:** 1h 32 min.

» **Country of Origin:** United Kingdom

» **IMDB Rating:** 6.3, Rotten Tomatoes: 71%

» **Genre:** Comedy, romance, and drama

» **Broadcast:** BBC Two (June 2021) / Bleecker Street -USA- (August 2021)

» **Directed by:** Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin

» **Screenplay:** Dennis Kelly

» **Cast:** James McAvoy, Sharon Horgan, and Samuel Logan

» **Synopsis:** A London couple consisting of a middle-class man and woman in their forties are confined to their home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are forced to re-evaluate their relationship as individual entities and as people living together.

The film was shot in Kensal Rise, London, and received positive reviews from specialists who called it brilliant, claustrophobic, and honest, especially because it addresses a universal theme that every family and couple faced during confinement, namely, human relationships and "forced" cohabitation.

The story takes place in a house. There are no exterior shots and the action takes place in three spaces, namely, the kitchen, the breakfast room, and the home's entrance.

The dialogues are focused on confinement, the government's actions in the face of the pandemic, education, health, work life, and other situations derived from COVID-19. However, confinement itself serves as a pretext for the (unmarried) couple[1] to introspect about their relationship and the things they have done right and/or wrong.

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1   The main characters' names are not mentioned. In fact, they refer to each other as "he" and "she." The only character that has a name is their son, who they refer to as "Artie."

The film uses the performance convention of "breaking the fourth wall" in which the actor and actress directly tell the audience what is going on. And although the couple exchanges dialogues, on most occasions, they use the camera and the audience as witnesses to what is happening.

During the film, there are powerful dialogues that reveal the frustration of confinement, the helplessness of not being able to leave, and the fear of not knowing what is happening with the virus. Examples of this are the death of the wife's mother and the husband losing his job. Both moments are perfectly developed through the direct interaction of the actor with the camera (the audience) as he/she heartbreakingly explains what has happened.

The script presents statements about the couple's life and the unexpected situations that are unleashed due to the pandemic, such as the loss of loved ones and work, the couple's estrangement, and their loving reconciliation.

The camera becomes another witness to the events, not only by "breaking the fourth wall," but also by using sequence shots inside the house, following the characters as they move and stopping when one of them addresses the audience or speaks. The fact that the action takes place in one space helps the audience and the camera establish a greater connection with the story and the narrative on display.

While using a single space where the action takes place is not a new resource, the way issues are discussed in this film is novel, especially at a time of such uncertainty worldwide. By using this technique to discuss an uncertain issue, the film becomes a sort of documentary/diary not only of what is happening to this couple but also of what is happening around the world.

The film relies on other resources such as a third character, the couple's son Artie, who can be seen as a "respite" from fearful, angry, and sad speeches. At the same time, in some scenes, the date is written at the bottom of the screen; this gives the audience an idea of the story's temporality. In addition to this element, the characters indicate that weeks or months that have passed during a variety of dialogues.

In terms of genre, and as outlined above, irony and sarcasm are the core of the film's dialogues, in addition to the fact that the couple talks throughout the film about what they are experiencing at that moment and even reflect on this new reality. The dialogues also embark on building the couple's relationship and what it means to live together day in and day out without being able to leave the house. Communication problems are put on display, and, finally, the partners reconsider their love as a couple. This element is even more interesting because, in one of the last scenes, he asks her to marry him, which leads to a catharsis after the arguments they have had. Considering all of the above, this film is more dramatic than comical, and although this is perhaps a somewhat reductionist categorization, according to what we established above at the theoretical level, the film possesses the necessary elements for this classification.

CONCLUSIONS

The narratives of these two audiovisual productions are based on the need to show something of what happened during confinement. Through sarcasm, irony, comedy, and drama, they retell what happened in many parts of the world, for example, reevaluation of the interaction between human beings, a reflection on the role of men and women in society, and the physical distancing experienced during the pandemic.

Cinema and television have found themselves at a new turning point, which calls us to rethink not only the industry but also the way stories can be told, stories that, through different resources, can reflect what happens in the minds of human beings. And, although these productions present a snapshot of events that took place in the UK, such issues became universal and, therefore, correlations can be established between what happened in other countries.

Although the theoretical framework mentions certain subgenres found in the film and the series, this classification has enriched the narratives and benefited the audiovisual productions because, thanks to these subgenres, the stories find different levels of understan-

ding and structures; aspects that, undoubtedly, mark new trends in these kinds of productions. Therefore, with the emergence and strengthening of these subgenres comes the advent of different structures that may be adapted to different consumer audiences.

Finally, the audiovisual stories that were analyzed present essential changes in storytelling; the series manages to get across a narrative using computer cameras and eliminates the creation of scenography since everything happens by Zoom. On the other hand, the film bases all of its dialogues on the difficulty that a couple faces with obligatory daily coexistence in a single space as a consequence of COVID-19. Thus, although the stories analyzed take place in England, narrative based on a universal theme like the pandemic reveals that cinema can be a reference for the whole world and that there will always be ways to reformulate stories, no matter how conventional they may seem.

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