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# ABUSE OF POWER THROUGH THE PRISM OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CINEMA

## Abstract

*Film and politics are two separate entities whose symbiosis leaves no one indifferent. At first glance, it looks like an oxymoron, since politics is the 'art of the possible' while film is the art of impossible, i. e. imaginary. Film deconstructs political (un)reality, raises politically important questions, sometimes creates public opinion in the interests of political actors and decision-makers, which remains hidden for the film audience. Another touchpoint of both arts is the circumstance that both of them have their own scripts, actors, directors, costume designers, producers, and last but not least, consumers. The aim of this article is to explain how political corruption works through the prism of mainstream movies (including documentary films) with political agenda and a strong (anti)corruption ethos. Selected cinematography examples are drawn from various moments in film history and geography and include Hollywood, Bollywood, Iberian and Russian political cinema. The author focuses on the political analysis of the film's view of the captured state, the financing of political parties, compromising material, in a word, the abuse of power.*

**Keywords:** *film, politics, corruption, political cinema, abuse of power.*

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## WHAT MAKES A FILM POLITICAL?
## TOWARDS IDENTIFYING THE POLITICAL IN FILM

*The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized.*

Elmer Davis

Scholars focused on the study of the political genre have failed to reach a consensus on the definition of political film. One of the reasons for this is fact that some nonpolitical movies have political aspects, so it is hard to categorize them as political movies. Hence, scholars avoid to define what makes a film political and prefer to identify a different typology of political films. Christensen and Haas identified four types of political films: pure political films, politically reflective films, socially reflective films and artist's political films.[1] Pure political films are produced by governments and they feature political processes, political figures (actors) and political events. Their political function is education or critique and the common genres are documentary and propaganda films. Mr Smith goes to Washington and Frost/Nixon are identified as pure political films.

Politically reflective films are depicted in allegorical and methaporical narratives so the audience could interpret political messages in them. These films are linked with current event or history and the common genres are sci-fi, horror, fantasy, thrillers. Political function of this type of film is to generate discussion, debate, sometimes critical thinking. Politically reflective films are interwoven with sociological imagination and they are visualizing socially desirable and undesirable behavior, beliefs and values, customs, law. Independence Day and Air Force One are paradigmatic examples of this type of political film.

Socially reflective films are related to politics of everyday life focusing on human rights issues, injustice, (in)equality and also reflects sociological imagination. Building social emphathy and tolerance is the political function of this type of political movie. The majority of Hollywood films produced and marketed as entertainment belong to this category, e.g. one of the most popular movies in history, Gone With the Wind, an epic historical romance during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era. Casablanca, one of the most layered films

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[1] T. Christensen & J. P. Haas (2005), *Projecting Politics*, New York: Routledge

to interpret belongs to this typology. For the majority of the audience, it is a Bogart-Bergam love story film whose replicas have transcended spatial and temporal frameworks. It is not just a film about strong passion but also a movie with democratic political messages, anti-fascist, pro-interventionist, pro-Allies political film. Casablanca also shows the phenomenon of the abuse of power through corrupt activities of Vichy French police chief captain Luis Renault. Through the character of captain Luis self-interest, institutionalized (systemic) corruption and collaborationist loyalty are critiqued.

The opposite situation is also possible, that *prima facie* political film is dominated by love. As an illustrative example I would cite The American President (1995), a film about a popular democratic president who is preparing for a re-election run and who attempts to consolidate the administration's 63% approval rating by passing a moderate crime control bill. Instead of shedding light on the logrolling phenomenon as a political market in which votes are exchanged as a sort of currency,[2] the film is focused on the love sentiments of the widowed president towards the female lobbyist who is working to pass legislation to reduce carbon dioxside emissions.

Artist's political films are creative, conjure up memory and they can belong to any genre. Their political function is imaginative and evocative so the audience can experience a different environment. These films, among other things also reflect political meaning. Mafia structure and the way it works through political mechanisms in Coppola's Godfather is a good example of this type of political movie.[3]

Political genre film could deliver an ideological or political message and it is usually percieved as political propaganda. The film industry, especially Hollywood production is sensitive to audience reaction and tries to avoid ideological movies. Political message films are put on the Hollywood agenda to raise awareness of the necessity of a political reform, for example campaign finance (Warren Beatty's film Bulworth).

From a sociological and historical perspective, in adittion to the primary artistic and aesthetic expression, foreign and domestic movies are undoubdtely pocally driven. The plot, background social values, a view of institutional activity, picture of otherness and sources of funding for films are political in nature. Five decades ago, author tandem

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[2] R. Holocombe (2006), *Public Sector Economics: The Role of Government in the American* Economy. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

[3] E. Giglio (2010), *Here's Looking at You Hollywood Film and Politics*, Baltimore: Peter Lang, 27.

Zimmer and Leggett concluded that "all films are political".[4] Political cinema is a construct which relies on the formation and transformation of subjectivity and the most narrative driven political cinema is biopolitical cinema.[5] In his thoughts on modern political cinema, known as Cinema 2, Gilles Deleuze concluded that cinematographic art should contribute to the "invention of the people".[6] The key difference between classical and modern political cinema is the idea of the people who are missing.[7] In case that the subjects of political cinema are not preconceived (for example, the Algerians in the Battle of Algiers), the key political role of the film is their construction out of the materials provided by culture and history.[8]

It is important to introduce the syntagm contemporary political cinema to the research agenda, which includes the spectrum of films made between the 1990s and the early 2010s on different meridians, in different societies and political cultures. This genre is constructed outside the classical cause-and-effect matrix and resistance to the neoliberal paradigm is the essence of this kind of political cinema. Contemporary political cinema as audio visual expression is symbiosis of philosophical framework and cinematic texts and images, with the intention of deconstructing ideological clichés.[9]

Philosophical terms such as uncinematic, acinema, impure cinema, non-cinema are nothing more than assigning political elements to film. According to Adorno, un-cinema is the negation of movement in modern cinema which constitutes its artistic character.[10] Adorno positioned cinema as a leader of modern art, but only insofar as it rebelled against its own status as art through self-awareness of its technological origin.[11] For Lyotard, the concept of acinema is a treat of sterile moments which "gives rise to perversion and not solely to propagation".[12]

[4] C. Zimmer & L. Legget (1974), "All Films Are Political", *SubStance 3* (9), 123-136.

[5] M. Holtmeier (2016), "The Modern Political Cinema: From Third Cinema to Contemporary Networked Biopolitics", *Film-Philosophy 20* (2-3), 303.

[6] Deleuze, G. (1989), *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 217.

[7] *Ibidem.*

[8] M. Holtmeier (2016), *Ibidem*, 303-323.

[9] J. L. Slattery (2019), "Contemporary Political Cinema", *Film-Philosophy* 23 (3), pp. 399-402.

[10] L. Nagib (2016), "Non-Cinema or The Location of Politics in Film", *Film-Philosophy 20* (1), 131-148.

[11] Hansen, M. B. (2012), *Cinema and Experience: Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 218.

[12] J. F. Lyotard (1986), "Acinema". in: Rosen, P. (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 351.

Bazin introduced the theoretical construct of impure cinema, which is succinctly reflected in the observation that cinema's "existence precedes its essence" and which without public can't exist, like a house that "has no meaning except as a habitat".[13]

Contemporary movies with political agenda are less focused on individuals deserving of national libertation and building a nation state, which was the key topic of militant Third Cinema movement in the 1960s. In contrast to postcolonial discourse, contemporary political cinema addresses history, collective memory through the creation and recreation of the audio-visual archive as world memory as one of the key pillars of film aesthetics today.[14] Patricia Pisters, relying on the theoretical concept of the Thousand Plateaus (Deleuze & Guattari) identified metallurgic strategies in contemporary media culture. She emphasized that contemporary filmmakers are metallurgists who form and express world memory, as memory goes beyond the conditions of psychology, via images and sounds which contribute to political conciousness of citizens as film public.[15]

## THE CORRUPTION PHENOMENON IN THE EYES OF CINEMATOGRAPHY – THE ILLUSION OF POWER OR HOW POLITICS CORRUPTS PEOPLE

Power and human greed are universal connectors of corruption in political life and political practice. Two centuries ago Lord Acton in his dictum wrote that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". There is no unique and universal anti-corruption medicine (*panacea*) because corruption is a phenomenon as old as society and state. Plato's philosopher-king teaches us that the learned virtue of governing society is a weak and insufficient barrier to human tempation. In the most concise way, for the purposes of this paper, we normatively define political corruption as abuse of public official position for private purposes. The normative element in this context represents a deviation from the common good (public interest), that is, from publicly and universally constituted preformance guidelines to preform some

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[13] A. Bazin (1967), "In Defence of Mixed Cinema", in: *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 53-75.
[14] Pisters, P. (2016), "The Filmmaker as Metallurgist: Political Cinema and World Memory", *Film-Philosophy 20* (1), 149-150.
[15] *Ibid.*

public functions by office holders who have a certain public function or electoral mandate.[16] In literature, institutional corruption as a form of social and political pathology is also defined as "a systemic and strategic influence which is legal that undermines the institution's effectiveness by diverting it from its purpose".[17]

The global world became more sensitive to corrupt practices in politics, which was affected by the end of the Cold War, the end of socialism, development of investigative journalism, the rise of democracy, the development of civil society, the spread of crime.[18] On a symbolic level, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked the demolition of the corruption wall. Until that political event, corruption was the model of behavior in many communist countries. Public policies were a facade for political corruption and unfair distribution of resources. By introducing democratic forms of government, the communist regimes became easily replaceable in a procedural sense even though non-domestic concept of excercising power remain constant. In these circumstances, in newly formed democratic states resources were limited and the capacities that would limit the missue of public property were insufficiently built. Citizens' dissatisfaction was additionaly motivated by bureaucratic red tape which was reflected by excessive work load and excessive use of documents.[19] It would be logically wrong to conclude that films that shed light on corruption were the exclusivity of the post-Cold War era. Orson Welles's black and white picture masterpiece Citizen Kane (1941) and Sweet Smell of Success (1957) illustrate the film industry's interest in corruption as a phenomenon of social pathology during and the post-WWII era. Citizen Kane is a film about rise of a businessman who came from nothing and rose to power by manipulating public opinion during the Spanish-American War. In building a yellow press empire and publishing scandalous articles, Kane became corrupt. This film demonstrates universal human greed as well as corruption of media that should be the guardian of the public interest.[20] Sweet Smell of Success is a movie about Sidney Falco, a corrupt Manhattan press agent who creates positive

[16] T. Perić Diligenski (2021), *Rasprava o političkoj korupciji*, Beograd: Čigoja Štampa, 35.

[17] L. Lessig (2013), "Institutional corruption defined", *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics 41* (3), 553.

[18] I. Krastev (2004), *Three Essays on the Politics of Anti-Corruption*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2.

[19] H. Altunok (2018), "Bureaucratic Red Tape", in: Farazmand, A. (ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*. Springer, Cham, 1-4.

[20] H. E. Spence (2021), *Media Corruption in the Age of Information*. Berlin: Springer

publicity for his clients and negative publicity for his anemies. In this film corrupt ambition is superior to journalistic ethics.

The psychological profile of corrupt political bosses as well as the staffing matrix for selecting people who are appointed to positions in political parties and public administration is intriguing for cinematography. The preferences of corrupt politicans in real political life as well as in the movie reduce to the choice of pragmatic actors who have don't care whether or not they represent a risk to the corrupt system. This logic leads to reduction of corruption cost and increases the odds of finding a reliable partner for corrupt exchange.[21]

A paradigmatic example of corruption at the highest political level that leads to state capture and unfair distribution of resources is represented by the film The Last King of Scotland (2006). This multi-genre political film (history, drama, biography, thriller) depicts the psychological metamorphosis of the fictional Ugandian dictator (Idi Amin) who wanted to modernize and improve the economic situation in his country. His political performance once again proved the truth of the sentence that hell is full of good meanings, but heaven is full of good works. When the charismatic leader orchestrated a military coup and finally obtained absolute power, he started systematically abusing it. His political practice was reduced to voluntarism and decisionism, based on pecuniary motives. The film visualizes the way the dictator built a classic modern patrimonial or neopatrimonial state, as a negative regime type associated with informal institutions such as corruption, clientelism and autocracy rule.[22] The Ugandian dictator who is a paradigmatic kleptocrat, sees and understands the state as a source of profit and he creates an environment for maximizing rents. The kleptocrat always gives primacy to the policy that channels resources into his own pockets and opposes policies that distribute benefits to the entire community.[23] Through the prism of film, losing absolute power is the dictator's political nightmare and his biggest fear.

The dystopian political thriller, V for Vendetta (2006) describes political corruption and social inequality as driving forces for activism of a masked vigilante, V who notes that "people should not be afraid of

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[21] Porta, D. della & Vanucci, A. (2010), "Politička korupcija i loša uprava u Italiji", *Political analysis 1* (2), 6.

[22] M. M. Charrad & J. Adams (2011), Introduction: Patrimonialism, Past and Present. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 636, 6-15.

[23] R. S. Ejkerman (2007), *Korupcija i vlast: uzroci, posledice i reforma*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 126-132.

their governments" but "governments should be afraid of their people". This film has strong anti-corruption sentiments and "mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject the politics of apathy in favor of politics of democratic struggle" (Ott 2010, 39).[24] V for Vendetta illustrates the universal negative impact of totalitarian and corrupt governments and also the universal human tendency for the conquest of freedom and the spirit of resistance. The educational role of this movie towards audience is reflected in raising awareness of manipulation and violence practiced by political elite and necessity for citizens to combat such inhuman practices.

## *Corrupt politics in Iberian cinematography*

Iberian cinematography has illuminated the presence of political corruption at the local level, which is also one of the most important social issues in Spain. Endemic corruption at the local level of governance in this country has been recognized as a pressing problem in the national public discourse.[25] The Realm (Spanish: El Reino, 2018) is film which studiously illuminates the omnipresent corruption in the post-Franco era, a period when Spain was moving towards the West. In such a political atmosphere, Spanish society and political market was attractive for foreign investors and the European Union's funds. This type of modernization created incentives for corruption and once again proved the truth of Samuel Huntington's observation that corruption in the majority of societies prevails in the most intensive phases of modernization.[26] Modernization in Spain created new sources of wealth and local politicians started abusing funds as rent seekers, buying real estate and yachts, and consequently hiding embezzled funds in Andorra. The Realm is a portrait of Manuel, a corrupt local politician who was selected as the scapegoat by his corrupt party colleagues, in order to present false anti-corruption results and enable the corrupt system to continue to function. Manuel refused to disappear abroad as suggested to him and he was arrested and charged. While he was on bail awaiting trial, he started a personal investigation to uncover the biggest corrupt fish. In that investigation, *kompromat* as a form of political vulgarity

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[24] B. L. Ott (2010), "The Visceral Politics of V for Vendetta: On Political Affect in Cinema", *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 27 (1), 39.

[25] M. Borrella & M. Rode (2021), "Love is blind: partisan alignment and political corruption in Spain", *SERIEs Journal of the Spanish Economic Situation 12* (3), 423.

[26] S. P. Huntington, (2007), "Modernization and Corruption", in: Arnold J. Heidenheimer et al (eds.), *Political Corruption, Concepts and Contexts, third edition*, New York: Routledge, 253.

for collecting evidence of crimes to use for blackmail was a necessary dramatic tool.[27]

## *Political corruption through the lens of Russian cinematography*

The political climate in Russia is not favorable to free-thinking artists, so the creation of a film about corruption as a sociopathological phenomenon in that country is worthy of praise. Leviathan (2014), a rare Russian film about corruption and local clientelistic networks was Oscar-nominated, recognized by Western audiences, and criticized by the Russian Government. The film was shot in 2014, which Putin declared the year of culture, but politics overcame cultural expression, which is a universal characteristic of authoritarian regimes. The film was targeted as "anti-Russian" because of the criticism of the church and local corrupt politicians, i. e. captured state and privatized institutions. Oriental despotism is creatively packaged in scenes where a lawyer is huging Putin in one photography and where the camera focuses on TV news regarding the contaversial Pussy Riot feminist group. The political mesage to the audience was sent through the scene in which main actor, Kolya and his friends use photographs of former SSSR presidents (Lenin, Brezhnev and Gorbachev) for target practice. The action of Leviathan takes place in an isolated Russian coastal town on whose shore is the skeleton of a whale as a metaphor for the Russian government which does not serve its citizens. This skeleton is a modern version of Hobbes's Leviathan, a symbol of the "postmodern recognition of contempoprary perversion of both church and state".[28] In this movie, the church and the govermnent as key institutions which constitute Russian identity are hotspots of abuse of power for achieving private goals. Politicians and priests prone to corruption create a parallel, informal institutional order in which only the best bribe offerers are included. The strength of informal institutions in a whale skeleton society is an expression of the inability of formal institutions to limit greed and private egoism.[29]

[27] J. Choy (2020), "*Kompromat*: A theory of blackmail as a system of governance", *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 147.

[28] G. Goff (2022), "Transforming Leviathan: Job, Hobbes, Zvyagintsev and Philosophical Progression", *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 26 (1), 3.

[29] V. Stanković i T. Perić Diligenski (2023), "Neformalni oblici društvene anomije", *Srpska politička misao*, 80 (2), 233.

## *Anti-corruption ethos in Bollywood cinematography*

Corruption is an inevitable topic in Bollywood cinematography since institutionalized corruption is pervasive in India. India's economic activity is dominantly gray, and in such an environment, citizens are forced to use informal institutions to exercise their rights. In order to acquire the basic elements of governance, buisinessman have to negotiate bureaucratic mazes.[30] Indian bureaucrats are prone to the red carpet phenomenon in order to extort more bribes. Citizens are the most affected by such institutional efficiency, which was recognized by Indian film directors and producers. Hindi cinema is the most engaged in terms of raising awarness about the harmfulness of corruption.

An excellent example of socially engaged film is An Insignificant Man (2016), a documentary film about massive anti-corruption protests in India, organized and managed by Aam Aadmi Party (the Common Man's Party). This party was an anti-corruption pioneer and headed by political leader Arvind Kejriwal. Another Hindi movie worth mentioning is Gabbar is Back (2015), a story about a man who creates his own anti-corruption military network (the Anti-corruption force) in order to eliminate the most corrupt individuals who hold public office. It is a film about a man dissapointed in the state apparatus who takes the law into his own hands, kidnapping and murdering corrupt public servants.

## *Abuse of power in documentary movies*

Documentary movies about political corruption shed light on corrupt practices of high level public officials and the people they are close to. Behind Closed Doors (2023) is such a film which portraits corruption of politically exposed persons (PEPs) in developing countries, who are included in bribery practices and money laundering. Over half a trillion dollars flows out of developing countries each year into Western economies via complex offshore structures. Offshore heavens serve to hide corrupt activities and finance secrets from outsiders.[31] Behind Closed Doors demystifies British tax heavens which try to attract non-residents by offering low taxation, light regulation and above all, secrecy. These finance heavens are attractive for political and economic actors from

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[30] J. Miklian & S. Carney, (2013), "Corruption, Justice and Violence in Democratic India", *SAIS Review of International Affairs 33* (1), 37.

[31] J. O'Donovan, H. Wagner, & S. Zeume (2016), "The Value of Offshore Secrets – Evidence from the Panama Papers", *Review of Financial Studies*, 1.

the former British colonies, who have acquired wealth by abusing power and public resources.

In the case of the Kenyatta family, the inheritors of Kenya's first independent president, Jomo Kennyatta illustrates how political corruption works. Sixty years after gaining independence, the Kenyatta dynasty is one of the wealthiest in Kenya. The main question is how president Jomo was able to become so rich on a modest salary. Declassified CIA reports testify that funds provided by foreign governments were used by Kenyatta and his associates to buy land for themselves instead of landless Kenyans. Uhuru Kenyatta, Jomo's son and president of Kenya (2013-2022) continued the family's financial practices and invested in offshore structures, though he claimed to be an advocate of transparency and an anti-corruption actor. The situation is similar in Azerbaijan, where the Aliyevs, politicians and the richest family own banks to lounder money through. The Pandora Papers expose a London property empire worth nearly 700 million dollars amassed by the ruling family of Azerbaijan. The corruption matrix is the same in Pakistan where the government of Nawaz Sharif passed a law which prevented tax authorities in this country from questioning the origin of money that entered Pakistan from abroad. After the Panama Papers were discovered, investigative agencies found out that Sharif couldn't justify the assets he had made from known sources of income. The Sharifs were never included in the list of the richest since the exact amount of their holdings is hidden in the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Luxembourg, etc.

## CONCLUSION

Film and politics are two separate entities whose symbiosis leaves no one indifferent. At first glance, it looks like an oxymoron, since politics is the 'art of the possible' while film is the art of impossible, i. e. imaginary. The film deconstructs political (un)reality, raises political important questions, sometimes creates public opinion in the interests of political actors and decision-makers, which remains hidden for the film audience. Another touchpoint of both arts is the circumstence that each of them has its own scripts, actors, directors for scenes, costume designers, producers, financiers and last but not least, consumers.

*In summa*, according to our opinion, a political film is constituted by two elements: a dominant political theme and a political message or at least information of political content that is sent to the audience. A

dominant political theme includes an insight into a political event, the way political institutions function and the behavior of political actors.

Political corruption, as the abuse of power for private purposes, on the movie screen is an attempt to engage artistically in the process of raising awarness of its harmfulness. Contemporary political cinema sheds light on its causes, manifestations and consequences. Films on political corruption educate the audience around the globe about the importance of sanctioning this form of social pathology.

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