The Political Nature of Films: Characteristics and Functions

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Abstract. The viewpoint of films being political has been one of the hotspots in international relations that many thinkers give analysis in putting films in a political frame, defining and valuing films from a political perspective. While the internal pattern for making films political and the boundary between films and politics remained vague in a lack of systematic understanding. Thus, this paper gives the internal logic of the politicization of film by exploring the causes, conditions, and essence of the politicization of film in clarifying the independence of film from politics. It is found that the first-person view provided by films makes films available for politically utilized, and the belief of films to be responsible for politics makes films expected to be politically utilized; The politicization of films is essentially the functionalization of films, on the one hand, shows the close relationship between the film industry and politics of their interactive effects in a complex system where audiences, filmmakers, policy decision-makers and critics are all involved. On the other hand, it implies the independence of the film industry from politics with consideration of the autonomy presented in different processes of the film industry.

Keywords: Political Nature, Films, Characteristics, Functions.

1. Introduction

Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, films began to be frequently and directly claimed to be political as the notion of political cinema is being discussed in the broader sense. “All movies are political.” film director Costa-Gavras said ahead of the Berlin Film Festival in 2008. That is very much the same as the assertion made by Christian Zimmer in 1974 “There is no innocent film, we would say, no film without some political incidence” [1,2].

As in the era of the Cold War, when the political struggle between the US and the Soviet Union reached its climax, the history of films witnessed the potential for them to transmit both the facts and emotions of the events depicted. Films not only portrayed the struggle but also assisted political actors and the general public in both countries in comprehending it. Therefore, all genres of films facilitate the Cold War by producing memorable figures such as James Bond, Alec Leamas, Harry Palmer, and Rambo, helping to shape popular culture and national identities [3]. Also, the political aims set in the development of the film industry in the Cold War Era become another strong supportive evidence to the assertion for films to be political. The cinema accused to be serving as a “weapon” for Cold War in propaganda to strengthen the contrast to political adversaries by portraying a particular film image [4]. Post-Cold War scholarship stated that various depictions in Cold War Cinema should be noted for containing “counterfactual” elements which contributed to the subversion of history for gaining political legitimacy in power struggles [5].

Studies mentioned above are all devoted to examining the roles of films in political struggle, which provide the analysis for films to be political, as a general agreement. This is, to some extent, because of the history where films intersect with politics in the struggle of powers with their different cultures, ideology and political beliefs projected and presented in the film as in every other part of society, explicitly or implicitly. Therefore, it could be said that studies above all examined the proposition of films being political from a result-oriented perspective as putting emphasis on the results of how films affected audiences or fulfilled their political missions historically and separately. There is a lack of analysis taken from the cause-oriented perspectives concerning what conditions decided the availability and necessity for films to be political, which lies as the rooted mechanism in relation to the concerns of both involvements of audiences in the process when films are being watched, and the

involvements of film-producers in the process when films are being created, systematically and comparatively.

This paper, therefore, will focus on the question of why films are political in clarifying the conditions for the notion of films to be political by comparing the notion from different perspectives with different participants (audiences & filmmakers) in different processes of cinema (being watched & being created). The conditions will be constructed and clarified from the characteristics of the films themselves and the motivation for film creation, ultimately indicating the functionalized need for films to be political. It attempted to validate a notion of political film while reiterating the independence of both politics as the idea of collective self-determination and cinema as an art form. In other words, can a link between politics and film be developed that would also provide a barrier between the two, preventing them from becoming conflated? Generally, this paper will take the films in the Cold War period (before & after) as a typical case for analysis.

2. Films as Message

Marshall McLuhan has the insight saying that "The medium is the message". Basically, it contends that a medium's characteristics—rather than the contents that it disseminates—have an impact on the society in which it functions [6]. He distinguishes media between hot media and cool media and states that movies, in comparison to speech, cartoons and the telephone as cool media, are types of hot media that are defined to be in the context of a dark environment, where in the visual sense, as depicted in high definition, thoroughly grabs the attention of the viewer. It tells the characteristics of films that movies can immerse the audience into images in a way that highly resembles what a person views and percepts in reality.

Based on that, it can be said that "The film is the message". The first-person view for people who are watching the films will be inevitably put into the films, therefore, leading to participation in forming a political sense based on the view provided by films. It is the process led by the characteristic of films themselves, instead of the message, as it does not convey political information and achieve political goals by instilling certain ideas but by shaping perspectives to guide the acceptance and tacit identification of political sense in subjective view.

It has to be noted that the expression of "First-person view (provided)" here refers to the characteristics of films, differently from the concept of First person shot- one type of film scene, and the concept of First-person point of view- a narrative or mode of storytelling [7, 8]. Here the First-person view provided by films was constructed based on McLuhan's notion of film as a hot medium that indicates the statement that film, with the characteristics itself, provides audiences with an (approximation of) subjective view that would exist no matter what shot is used or what narrative or mode are adopted.

Accordingly, two classic approaches, dehumanizing and restaging, are used, with the significance of the first-person view possessed by films, for exerting influences on audiences, which consequently makes films political.

2.1. Dehumanizing

Dehumanization, described in the literature to be the process of denying humanness to humans by stripping, symbolically or literally, of characteristics that make them human, can be applied more profoundly and effectively in films with the first-person view.

In "The Battleship Potemkin", which is a Soviet silent drama film released in 1925, many long looking down at Potemkin's foredeck shots are used that depict the image of masses of men moving in unison [9]. It avoids creating any three-dimensional individuals [10]. Thus, the process of presenting the images above in the eyes of audiences, where people appear as a mass comprised of numerous sharply visible but momentarily glimpsed faces, is also the process of dehumanizing those groups of people in the audience's immediate subjective experience that can potentially result in the formation of subjective identification of the dehumanization.

Politically, it can be served for politicide if these kinds of long shots are used on antagonists-making groups of people appear on the screen on the stage as an impersonal mass rather than individuals, thus, dehumanizing them in the mind of the viewer [10,11].

2.2. Restaging

Restaging, which is to produce or perform a new production of (a play), here refers to the restaging of history. Various scholars have found the presentation of histories in cinema, as Pierre Sorlin described films as "a major source of information" [4]. The film, with the knowledge and emotional experience it offers more than any other source of historical information, is where the public's knowledge of major events in history, the Cold War as an example, comes from [10]. While there are implicit differences between politicians cited above that the latter one mentions about the emotional experience, except for knowledge, which indicates significant involvement of the First-person view in restaging history. Film enabled audiences to take the first-person view where different focuses of history in films will be passed to the audiences. In other words, movie representations can be used to interfere with or even reshape people's understanding of history [5].

In Manchurian Candidate, the plot presents a focus on the history of the Korean War, specifically how veteran Raymond Shaw was brainwashed by communists following the capture of his Army platoon and how he later returned to civilian life in the United States where he unwittingly participated in an international communist conspiracy [12]. As a consequence of this sort of focus, the audience is left with the mistaken belief that the Soviet Union deployed evil combat tactics that the US has refused. Therefore, the film is committed to the formation of collective hostility towards the Soviets. The focuses selected in this film worked well as it eventually contributed to the collective subjective emotional preferences, meeting the political aims of setting contraries from the United States to their rivalries. Furthermore, the process can be implicit as it does not directly convey certain appeals or declarations but through the internalization of the first-person view provided when watching the cinema.

Overall, characteristics of films make films available for being political in terms of shaping the audience's subjective view collectively. The First-person view of films grants this medium effectiveness for being political in forming public sense and ideas as a condition for the proposition "Films are political" to be established.

3. Films as Instrument

The political aims set in the film industry, especially in the Cold War Era, served as another strong supportive evidence to the assertion that films are political. Though the actual motivation, or to say, the original intention of films to be made, can be difficult to examine for its complexity, films were seen as one of the important strategies in political struggle on cultural and ideological levels, both theoretically and practically. Viewing films as instruments provides a condition for films to be political with a focus on the process when the film is being created.

Marxist film theory centers on concepts that make possible a political understanding of the medium [13]. According to political theorists of Marxism, films are valuable, as one type of new medium, in terms of politics. Lenin, for example, regarded cinema as the most important instrument for educating the populace [14]. They highly valued the function of films in educating the masses, as Marx and Engels highly valued the significance of the film as part of the superstructure when it is exerting an effect on the infrastructure. Including Marx's ideas that culture cannot really exist independently, films, to some extent, will be purely regarded as a tool related to and responsible for political affairs, as Marxism demands that films have the willingness and capability to convey a progressive vision and address issues that are genuinely current [15].

It can be interpreted as films should be political, where value judgments are projected into the creation of films by pointing out what films and filmmakers ought to be doing and promoting [16]. As a result of the utilitarian nature of the viewpoint above, tendentiousness is welcomed in films as a

different unit of power has the legitimacy of certain political ideas after respectively making their value judgments. Then, films with their tendentiousness are embedded into the discussion of politics, representing the intention of different power holders, such as the Soviet government and the US government in the Cold War Era, leading to the disappearance of independency in film creation. For instance, the US has congressional hearings held 'Regarding Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry', with some historians pointing out the Soviet films industry as a center of Stalinist intrigue' [17]. The US Congress also made Hollywood a fortified point for generating films that resembled Cold War didacticism for conveying anti-communist ideas, for instance, Big Jim McClain and My Son John, both offering a theatrical portrayal of American communists while highlighting the evil deeds of "Communist fifth columns," espionage, and subversion [17]. In these cases, a vicious circle of pointing films to be political occurred in the context of national political conflict: as the nature of films to be political instruments is emphasized, the accusation of films to be politically made leads to universal usage of films as an instrument where the suspicion chain in political struggle is formed.

Further, viewing films as instrument forms an expectation for the film industry where films are due to be political for the public. This expectation can trigger more extensive and, to some extent, more utilitarian interpretations and discussions of the argument that films are political. The suspicion that cinema is political in its purpose has been developed and applied to film studies ever since this expectation was formally expressed theoretically (e.g., Marxism) and historically (e.g., the Cold War). Therefore, this expectation, although not widespread, can still be a condition for films to be political as it provides evidence to believe films are political for interpreting films in political analysis. Inherently, there have been multiple tries; perhaps the most exaggerated version of Marx's film Studies is an interpretation of childhood films that view the swamp in "Shrek" as way a mirror of how proletarians are viewed by the bourgeoisie and stating that the society Shrek could be a part of is a Fascist regime [18]. To this extent, films are political because films are expected to be political for the creation, and this kind of expectation further influence how films are understood, which leaves space for political interpretation of films.

4. Discussion: Films to be Functionalized

Two perspectives are provided in response to the question of why films are political as two conditions for the judgments to establish: (1) Films are political because the films have the characteristics to be utilized politically; (2) Films are political because the films have the expectations to be created politically. The multiple perspectives used here are important as different participants in the different processes of cinema from upstream link to downstream link. Therefore, this part will aim at drawing comprehensive conclusions by focusing on how these two perspectives indicate the relationship between politics and films.

Two conditions for films to be political stated in this essay point to the notion that when people say, "Films are political", they are saying, "Films are functionalized. Functionalized means to cause to be functional that functionalized films is a result-oriented expression, indicating an interactive process of politicization for being engaged in politically functional. The process includes the designer and targeted group of the function, specifically referring to subjects mentioned when stating the conditions for films to be political: audiences (people who watch films and interpret films), film creators and political decision-makers. For the first condition, the first-person view provided by films grants sufficient feasibility for functionalizing films as audiences are collectively influenced by films in forming political ideas. For the second condition, the recognition that films should serve political purposes provides a strong imperative for functionalizing films, as film creators are promoted by political leaders to make films politically. These two conditions work together in generating a broad and inaccurate definition of political films and resulting in a continuous strengthening of the idea that films are political. Audiences, film creators, and political leaders, in turn, become the target group, and the designer of functionalized films, as they all contribute to the practicing and the affirmation of

films to be political-when films being watched or being created. With the context of international political struggle, the functionalization of films is the amplification of political effects that can be made by films. This functionalization extends beyond the mere context of international political struggle and encompasses the amplification of political interpretations within films. It caused the consideration of films to be political but undermined the independence of the film.

Films are functionalized by attaching films and the development of the film industry to politics or political history with the external transfer of the right of explanation. Along the following path of tracing film for its meanings: firstly, films are asked for "Who is speaking?" the right of explanation shifts from audiences to the filmmakers, then, films are asked for "Who leads the speaking (of filmmakers)?" as the right of explanation shift to the political leaders [19]. Ultimately, political leaders provide legitimacy, by value judgments, for making films "speak" in the political aspect, and the right of explanation finally passed to the political scene.

However, two conditions for films to be political implicitly reveal the way to draw a line between films as independent forms of art and political affairs, that is, to realize the autonomy of films. Indeed, films have the first-person view for shaping public political views. However, this does not mean that films ultimately all result in the consequences of forming a certain political stance. It is because, from the perspective of being viewed, films are being functionalized, which implies the passivity of films in relation to politics, that the apparent close connection between politics and cinema may simply be a historical encounter with occasionality [20]. Instead, films still own their artistic autonomy films as they could be expected to be politically motivated according to certain theories but not practically made for political aims. Here the films are functionalized not entirely through the external transfer of explanation rights but the internal change for considering which areas the function of films are to be played. The conviction that cinema has strong political relevance actually asks filmmakers rhetorically about the viability and impossibility of their works, thus encouraging them to revolutionize the potential of films as the notion that made cinema passively dependent on politics is subverted. Further, films can be political while maintaining autonomy provided that filmmakers are given credit for this obligation based on their artistic identities, notably regarding their positions as professionals in the public spheres as artists [21]. For audiences, the autonomy of functionalized films can be embodied in the process of internalizing the perspective on historical or political events offered by the film. The audience's personal experiences and sense of values directly participate in the process by which a film influences the audience's political stance through the particular view films provide and determines the outcome of this influence. It could be regarded as a downstream reprocessing of the film industry after being firstly functionalized by political decision-makers and filmmakers where a film thought to be political will resonate to all sides, in apposition opposition or neutralizing attitudes, even if it is made for one side's political aims [21]. The involvement of individuality renders films to be independent of being generalized as a political tool, as there is uncertainty in the ultimate effects on the public.

Overall, it is important not to get limited in the discussion of political determinism with the essential subject of politics itself but to consider the autonomy in the practices of functionalized films.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, films can be political for two conditions with focuses on the characteristics of films' presentation and the motivation of the film's creation, respectively, stating that the effects of films can influence on public's political view with its distinctive characteristics of providing a first-person view and the expectations for films to be made for politically motivated. These two perspectives of viewing films and the films industry in relation to politics together depict an interactive process of the essence of regarding films to be political, that is, the functionalization of films, where political decision-makers, filmmakers, audiences and critics all get involved and devote to the politicization of films. Consequently, films have a certain responsibility for politics and have actual effects on politics, no matter whether viewed from the process of making films, watching films, or evaluating

films. Another result of films being functionalized is the diminution of film's independence from politics and the deepening doubts about that diminution where the rights of explanation of films have been shifted outwards.

However, there is still independence can be found in the process of functionalized films where the two conditions cannot be sufficient in support of a generalized accusation that films are political. Firstly, the coinciding and interactive effects between politics and films may not be determined, and the appeal of films to carry political responsibility can be a simplification. Also, the autonomy of film is reflected in the situation that the filmmaker is driven by personal motivation, the internalized interpretation of the audience/critics, and the expansion of the influence scope of film itself as an art form. Autonomy can help with drawing a line between politics and films.

To a certain extent, the study has filled in the cause-oriented interpretation of the viewpoint of films to be political and makes some progress in the comprehensiveness of the interpretation as the analysis includes the film industry chain and different subjects involved. Therefore, the study not only has some academic significance but also has a certain reference value for the practice of subjects involved in the film industry, such as moviegoers or filmmakers.

Nevertheless, the study mainly focused on the era of the Cold War, where political struggle. The main narrative mode in the international context makes the analysis confined to the analysis of horizontal development and limited vertical development. It can be improved by extending the application and examination of the pattern of politically (or not) functionalized films in periods when direct political struggle does not take dominance or the atmosphere of political struggle is weakened.

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