

### “Every Film is Political”

The statement at the fore of this essay was written by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, who were writers for the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*. The statement is very broad. The Oxford English Dictionary states the word “political” means, “relating to the government or public affairs of a country” (OED: 2,228). When most people think of politics, they think almost solely of their own government. The statement says that ‘every film is political,’ therefore this would include films as obscure as Wayne’s World (Spheeris: 1992) or Wallace and Gromit: the Curse of the Were-Rabbit (Box & Park: 2005) as political films. With this meaning of politics, this seems a little far-fetched. Once put in to context however, the statement made in the Comolli and Narboni article does not conform to what one would generally think of as politics. If this statement is written in full it reads, “every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing)” (Comolli, Narboni: 24). The expansion of this statement narrows down the topic somewhat. They have narrowed it down into saying that every film goes along with the dominant ideology of the culture in which it was produced. They are basically saying that films are a commentary on the society in which they were produced. Therefore this essay will look at three different types of film: those which are obviously political in the sense that we think of politics, those which on the surface do not seem political but do have political undertones running through them and reflect the dominant ideology in which they were produced, and films which do not seem to be political. The films I will be looking at to do this are: Good Night and Good Luck (Clooney: 2005) one of two very political films released with George Clooney in 2006 - the other being Syriana (Gaghan: 2005); Hard Candy (Slade: 2005), and how it addresses several modern taboos and reflects dominant ideology; and Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit to explain why films with no real political meaning can still be classified as political films.

The Comolli and Narboni editorial of 1969 explains the political tones of a feature film: “what the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology” (Comolli, Narboni: 25). Their message is pretty straightforward: because the filmmaker lives in this ideology and culture, he is a part of it, a part of shaping it, so what his camera films reflects - whether he intends it to or not - the dominant ideology. They also talk of films which “attack the ideology” (Comolli, Narboni: 26) saying that they “do not effectively criticize the ideological system in which they are embedded because they unquestioningly adopt its language and its imagery” (Comolli, Narboni: 27). This is a good point as it shows that whatever a person films will be part of the ideology even if this is not what he or she wants to happen. The filmmaker is blindly following the ideology whether he or she likes it or not. If he or she stretches outside the borders too far, however, and the film becomes too confused for the public then the film will be a barely-seen, art-house film. “‘What the public wants’ means ‘what the dominant ideology wants’” (Comolli, Narboni: 26). Ideology is a term coined by Karl Marx. “Ideology functions as the superstructure of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society” (Felluga), this is a good description of how ideology is the basis for culture. It does however leave our expanded statement in doubt; surely it must be possible to make films that are outside of the dominant ideology of a society. However, this is not possible. No matter how hard a filmmaker may try, he or she can never fully be away from the dominant ideology; indeed while it is possible to argue against a strongly held belief that people may have, it cannot by itself break free of the ideology because - as Comolli and Narboni said - it is not possible to criticize the ideological system within which filmmakers are embedded because they adopt its language and imagery. Some films try to make very political statements Good Night and Good Luck is one such film.

Good Night and Good Luck is the 2<sup>nd</sup> film directed by film star George Clooney, and is one that makes a strong political statement. The film takes on a 1950's style with the film shot in black and white. The film is a comment on the Communist witch-hunts led by Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950's. That witch-hunt caught thousands, including Charlie Chaplin, for having tenuous links to the communist regime in Soviet Russia. The film follows newscaster Edward Murrow as he and his producer, Fred Friendly, look to expose McCarthy to the senate. Many would say that Clooney's release of such a film in this current political climate is making a statement about the current administration's Patriot Act (2001) which led to more witch-hunts in the period after 9/11, and under which Middle Eastern Americans live in fear, and indeed Americans who have been there for multiple generations are convicted for speaking out against the Bush administration. This effectively nullifies the right to freedom of speech. The situation is stated by a character in the film as a "travesty of justice" that ordinary Americans are being tried for as little as their father reading a Soviet magazine. This is the case of Milo Radulovich who as reported in the film was severed from the air force because his father read one Soviet newspaper. When Murrow takes on McCarthy, he is seen as some kind of all-powerful figure whom the American government listens to, and who has a great influence over what goes on. Perhaps Clooney is making a comment that someone like this is needed again now. Last year Clooney went to Darfur to report back to the US government about the genocide taking place there. Perhaps Clooney sees himself as this figure. When Murrow defeats McCarthy by getting the senate to review his methods, the CBS news crew celebrate in a big way. Clooney's other film release last year also was Syriana, another political film about America's need for oil, and about the American secret service. It comments on the things America does to get its way in the political climate. George Clooney's character carries out car bombings and then becomes hunted by his own government, and eventually turns on them to save a political figure. These two Clooney films are good examples of overtly political films. There are three genres of film that always have a political theme running through them. The first of these is undoubtedly the war film. Generally comments are made that either the war is something that should never have happened or it is something that is good for the country. Apocalypse Now (Coppola: 1979) gives a negative view of the American situation in Vietnam, with scared American soldiers slaughtering innocent Vietnam citizens on their way to assassinate their own soldier. It shows a kind of insanity behind the American military. A film like Jarhead (Mendes: 2005) depicts America sending all of its armed forces to Iraq and then just leaving them in the desert for several months on end. They wait for the day when they can fight, and yet that day never comes. Jarhead represents the whole expedition as a complete waste of time and money whilst the soldiers live in poor conditions. The second political film genre is that of crime. Crime films often depict the ineptitude of a nation's police force, or rules are always broken and anything goes in cracking a major crime lord. Other people are put at risk so our hero can save the day. The last and perhaps most obvious is a sub-genre, that of the political thriller. Films like All the Presidents Men (Pakula: 1976), Sum of all Fears (Robinson: 2002), or The Manchurian Candidate (Frankenheimer: 1962) make large statements about the political climate in which they were made. There are of course also many films like Independence Day (Emmerich: 1996), for example, which make some Action/Adventure and even Sci-Fi films very political.

Now that overly political films have been discussed, this essay will go onto discuss those films which don't make references to political ideas directly, but which take a more secondary approach to them through hidden undertones. Hard Candy focuses on two modern taboos: those of child pornography and safety in Internet chat rooms. Several years ago on the Internet, child pornography was rife. This film brings the topic back to the viewer mind as we find Geoff, the main character, may have been taking pictures of underage girls (he is a photographer by trade). This allegation is brought

upon him by the protagonist, Hayley, but is never confirmed (at one point she finds a collection of photos and states, “oh, man. This is what they make those federal laws for, Geoff. This is officially sick”). The audience is not, however, given any visual evidence of this fact. The other taboo is that of Internet chat rooms. The problem that surfaced here was that people were lying about their ages online so there was nothing to stop a 30-year-old chatting up a 12-year-old saying he was 13. The American government and certain companies tried to combat this, and it eventually led to Microsoft deciding to shut their chat room. The film explores this at the very beginning as Geoff and Hayley meet online, and throughout the film it talks about how he did things to impress Hayley online, like researching bands that she mentions. It is also hinted that he is a paedophile in whom he chooses to talk to online. Hayley says, “You’ve been stalking me. I went into different chat rooms using other screen names, and watched as you’d get to know other women – then drop the chats when you realized they were older than me. You took your sweet time sniffing out someone my age.” Geoff tries to defend himself throughout the film against the charges Hayley puts against him. She is like a larger-than-life character who is above the law. The film ends with us having no real idea of who she is, indeed she dispels everything we think we know about her at the end. She is the law, she is the country that doesn’t want to see its children raped and taken advantage of. Geoff asks, “Who the hell are you?” and Hayley replies, “Every little girl you ever watched. Touched. Hurt. Screwed. Killed. And we’re all back now to cut you off. Snip snip.” The film is deeper than just these two taboos, however, it also conforms with the idea of dominant ideology as the American way of life is portrayed (albeit in a slightly twisted way). We get small glimpses at American culture from Geoff’s house, the coffee shop in which the film starts and also from the characters way of life and clothing. The way Geoff acts and even the way he speaks are commentaries on American life. The idea that he is rather well off from his job and appears to be living the American dream is important. Many films base their narratives around political issues and taboos. Brokeback Mountain (Lee: 2005), for example, is a case study of American feelings on homosexuality: something they are still not happy to accept as a nation. In the 1940’s films about people being unfaithful in relationships was the taboo and so the film Brief Encounter (Lean: 1945) was very controversial when it was released in 1945. Filmmakers are good at finding what people fear or are worried about in a certain period and exploiting it. It is what the dominant ideology is afraid of.

There are, however, films that have no traditional political merit, so one wonders if they still are political. By looking at Wallace and Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit in terms of it portraying the dominant ideology of which it was made one can see that yes it can. Wallace and Gromit were in the 1990’s very popular TV viewing in England and the film released in 2005 got a similar response. Wallace and Gromit have always been decidedly British in the way they are portrayed. From the very beginning when we see them get called out to catch a rabbit and we see them drinking a cup of tea this has been shown to the audience. It may depict a stereotypical view of small town England, but it still reflects the dominant ideology as it portrays a simple English existence. The village pictured is an exaggerated version of villages as they have existed for centuries. The film also makes comments on class in Britain, with the stuck up and pompous upper-class Victor Quartermaine undermining the efforts of our two middle-class protagonists. More obviously, British signifiers are the old and simple English church, the northern accents, and even the fair that is held outside the old manor house. This with its candy floss, Tombola, Shooting Gallery and bouncy castle is a typical quaint celebration. The villagers themselves are shown as very simple folk who do not want any trouble or anything to go wrong with their vegetable competition, reminding one a little of the England of Medieval peasants. By way of a political agenda being displayed in the film, there is not one which stands out, however, one could go so far as to say that the Etonian’s running the country are portrayed by Lady Tottington and Victor Quartermaine, whilst the general naïve citizenry are portrayed by the villagers, and Wallace and

Gromit are the connection between the two. All of these signifiers display to the audience that this is a British film and that it reflects – however twisted it may be – a quaint British village. There are many obscure films, which, like Wallace and Gromit, do not appear to have a political message to them. Wayne's World was cited earlier and is another good example. Through comedy, it depicts the struggle between an individual and a corporation. At no stage in the narrative are politics even mentioned. However, in this film and in many others there are conflicts in which the depiction of good and evil is a political tool. All of the films mentioned have had a conflict as a part of their narratives: “blockbuster films typically represent the world with a simplified dichotomy of good versus evil” (Prince: 28). This is done by the filmmaker because it allows him to further the plot. However, this can also be seen to comment on a dominant ideology whose own conflicts depict one side as Good and the other as Evil. With it being hard to prove that a film cannot be a commentary on the dominant ideology of its production one may wonder if it is possible for a film not to be political. Because all films comment on a dominant ideology, they must be political.

Other authors writing on the subject since Comolli and Narboni have tended to be more or less in agreement with what they said. In his book, Political Film, Mike Wayne said, “All films are political, but films are not all political in the same way” (Wayne: 1). An assumption of the different ways he is thinking of are those of ideology and of blatant politics and possibly even an economic reason. Stephen Prince says, “As a medium, film is uniquely gifted in its ability to mirror and refract the national mood and events, and not only because of the extraordinary emotional power with which it speaks” (Prince: 38). This statement by Prince is talking of film's ability to reflect the changes to a dominant ideology by its mirroring of events that have taken place. For example, 2006's two 9/11 films, United 93 (Greengrass: 2006) and World Trade Centre (Stone: 2006), both take a patriotic view of the terrorist attacks. Any film which has dialogue is in effect already ideological as the characters' voices give away emotion, accent and language. Images also make a film ideological: a scene shot in central Baghdad will be given completely different meanings by a British or Iraqi director even if the dialogue and action remain the same. Lastly, the music is able to portray much about the mood of the piece; coupled with images, it can be used to give positive or negative views of a certain place or time. Every film is political as they all take place within a culture's dominant ideology and they cannot escape this. Films shot in multiple cultures will invariably keep the dominant ideology of the director whilst getting a small input from the outside world.

In conclusion there are three basic types of political film. There are those that shout out a loud political message and want to be heard and listened to. “The visual and narrative structures of American films define the political realm in a provisional and limited way” (Prince: 167). They try to change the way the public feel about certain events and try and get the attention of those in charge, or in the case of a propaganda film they hope to swing the public in favour of the government or their rivals. The second type is that of the film which challenges taboos and is a definitive of the dominant ideology. The last type is the film that has no political message but which still carries the dominant ideology with it. It is as this last type displays true that all films must be political in accordance with Comolli and Narboni's idea of what constitutes politics because all film is a product of the culture in which it was produced.

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