A Guide for the Political Analysis of Movies

Here we explore several approaches to writing about movies from a political standpoint. At the outset, it is important to bear in mind that there is no one approach that will suit all purposes and situations. Rather, we hope that the ideas we discuss here will serve as heuristic devices—useful, but not ends in themselves—for students who want to (or have to) write about politics and film. As a starting point, we discuss the analysis of an individual film, although you may be interested in writing about several movies that evoke a particular theme. Consistent with the theme of this text, our general purpose will be identifying political messages in movies.

When applied to writing about film, “analysis” is an ambiguous term. Most instructors will expect more from students than a mere review of a movie (although that may be one assignment in some classes). Analysis means going beyond a simple evaluation (review) of a movie to a level of explanation. It may be as straightforward a task as explaining in greater depth and detail your opinion of a film. By reflecting in a sustained manner on your own response to a film and connecting that response to the film’s construction—its use of lighting, for example, or particular lines of dialogue—you can put together an argument about a film’s political expression. As William H. Phillips writes in a useful guide on the subject, “Film analysis is a way of explaining what the viewer sees and hears in a film, and how and why the viewer reacts.” Comparing and contrasting several films at once provides another analytic springboard, but we will begin with the task of analyzing a single film.

*Political* analysis means a focus on the political meanings, implications, and messages that a film contains. Because “political” also is an ambiguous term, the burden may fall upon the
writer to demonstrate how a film conveys political ideas, events, and values. One consideration to bear in mind is that political analysis, although it may focus exclusively on a movie itself, also may link a film to external events, individuals, and institutions. Similarly, when conducting a political analysis of a film, you may wish to bring political ideology and values to bear upon it. For example, you may examine a film’s support or rejection of individualism as an ideological value. You might also construct a spectrum of individualism versus communal action on either end and argue an interpretation of a film that puts its political message somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

**Watching Movies**

Although most films students analyze are viewed via DVD on a television screen, the ideal setting is to screen a movie at least once in a cinema with an audience. As we discussed in Chapter 2, moviegoing is a social activity, and you can learn much about a movie from the reactions of fellow attendees—even if they are strangers. Additionally, movies are generally intended to be viewed on a large screen, and some elements of the cinematic art (e.g., the framing of a scene) are much more difficult to appreciate on a small screen. In fact, many DVD versions of popular movies cut out screen space to fit the dimensions of television screens, so when possible, it is preferable to watch a letterboxed (rectangular) version of a film.

Ideally, also, it is best to watch a movie twice before attempting to analyze or write about it. (Of course, this is much easier to do with a DVD player or Netflix account, so some trade-offs are involved!) If you have enough time, the first viewing should be devoted to just enjoying the movie without a great deal of analysis. Keep a notebook handy, though, to jot down first
impressions or questions as they pop up. The first screening of a movie will probably mold your initial evaluation; that is, you will know whether and basically why you did or did not like the movie.

Although your personal affinity for a movie is quite important, the point of a political film analysis is to speak to a film’s ideological positioning and political messaging. It is essential to maintain a certain amount of distance between your opinion of the movie as entertainment and what it may represent politically. That said, after viewing a movie it is a good idea to reflect upon your opinion. Exactly why did you like or dislike it? What did you like the most? What about the movie bothered you? Confused you? Surprised you? Your answers to these sorts of questions can provide a means of imagining how the movie might affect others and perhaps constitute a springboard for deeper analysis.

After seeing a film once, you should be able to initially categorize it according to the typology of political films discussed in Chapter 1 by determining to what extent political content and intent are embodied in it. Political content is generally easy to identify. Does the movie involve major characters who are politicians or government officials of any type, such as police officers? Is the setting for the film a political institution, such as Congress or the presidency? Is it a legal institutional setting like a courthouse? Are political and social issues debated or part of the setting? Identifying political intent can be much more challenging. To what extent does the film seem to be intent on sending political messages? Do characters discuss what seem to be political issues? Does a character clearly identified with a particular social value or political viewpoint perish or prosper? Are political values or ideologies represented in the script? Is the message, if any, clear and straightforward or subtle and/or murky?

If a movie seems to be low in terms of both political content and intent, it may still yield
interesting reflections of social and political reality. For example, how does the movie portray characters of different races and gender? How are social classes depicted, if at all? Does the movie seem to judge certain kinds of characters because of their race, class, and so on? Is the movie consistent with prevailing ideas about the economic and social system, or does it question them?

The answer to these and many other possible indicators of political messages may become clearer upon a second viewing of the film, when you can worry less about following the plot and more closely scrutinize the details. A second view also will enable you to study the individual components of the film. You will probably want to take more detailed notes, too.

One convenient way of organizing a political film analysis is to consider the elements of film production discussed in Chapter 2 as they apply to the film you are analyzing. The following sections provide some suggestions along those lines.

**Conception**

Understanding the conceptual origins of a movie may put it in political perspective. Information about a film’s conception may be relatively obvious (e.g., a remake or a sequel) or may require some investigation. Whose idea was the movie? Is it based on a novel or other preexisting source material? Is it based on a true or historical story, or is it purely fictional? After answering these sorts of questions, consider whether they provide any political perspective on the movie.

**Production**
As discussed in Chapter 2, a film’s producers may wield significant influence over its content. Find out which company and individuals controlled its production. Do they have obvious political ties or a history of producing politically significant movies? Is the movie from one of the major Hollywood studios or is it an independent film? What was its budget? The answers to these kinds of questions may provide cues with respect to its political orientation.

**Screenplay and Story**

At the heart of most political film analyses will be a careful exploration of its content. Presumably at this point, you will already have a good idea if the film carries an overt political message or if it is merely reflective of social and political reality. But how was this message created?

**Genre and Subject Matter**

Choice of genre can be a significant factor in identifying a film’s political messages. If the movie falls clearly into a recognizable genre (western, romantic comedy, etc.), how do its plot and characters square with the expectations that this genre creates? For example, in a western, who are the good and bad guys? How does the movie comment about their goodness or lack thereof? If the movie seems to subvert the genre (perhaps with an unconventional hero or unexpected plot twist), what message does that imply?

If the film’s subject matter is openly political, how are political institutions and actors treated? Does the movie tend to rely upon the movie conventions discussed in Chapter 2
(personalization, sugarcoating, the “unlabeled bottle,” ambivalence)? Does the story seem to reinforce a particular political ideology or value, and if so, how? Of particular interest here will be the film’s ending. Endings typically provide the most compelling judgment of a film’s characters (and the ideas they represent). How does the film reconcile the issues it raises?

If the film is based on historical events, how does it appear to comment on those events? Does it represent a departure from popular understanding or does it reinforce conventional wisdom?

**Direction**

As noted in Chapter 2, direction is commonly thought to constitute the creative centerpiece of modern films. Identify the director of the movie and learn whether he or she has any history of creating politically significant movies. If the director has an avowed political affiliation or ideological orientation, bear this in mind as you view the film. Does the movie you are analyzing contain any obvious trademarks of this director’s past works? If it seems to represent a departure from past work, make note of the differences and try to understand why the director has chosen to use a different approach.

Try to determine whether the film takes a formalistic or a realistic approach. If it seems to be formalistic, identify the techniques the director uses to create an alternate reality and how this reality may impinge upon the movie’s message. If the film seems to be striving for realism, how is this achieved? Are there any obvious lapses in the film’s sense of reality? Do you accept this version of reality? Why or why not? (Be careful—some films create a very “realistic” feeling by using formal and ultimately artificial techniques!)
Try to identify specific aspects of the movie’s art that reinforce its political message. In some movies, it will be difficult to identify and to document all these components, so you might need to closely observe a few key scenes that seem to be at the core of the movie’s political meaning.

**Titles**

Opening titles prepare an audience for a film’s content. How are the titles in your film consistent with the political themes you have identified?

**Sound and Dialogue**

Sound may be the most difficult aspect of a film to link to political analysis. William H. Phillips suggests running a scene without the picture so that you can focus on the use of sound. In a book that provides many useful ideas about analyzing films, Timothy Corrigan suggests consideration of the following questions:

- Does the sound ever become more important than the image, and what is the reason for this unusual strategy?
- What role does silence play in the movie?
- Are there sound motifs that identify the characters or actions?
- If you had to pick three key sound sequences from this movie, what would they be and why?
Perhaps the answers to these questions will relate to the political messages you have identified.

**Music**

Music may be a little easier to link to political message-making, particularly because modern moviemakers are increasingly likely to use rock songs with identifiable lyrics. How do the songs chosen for the soundtrack coincide with (or perhaps provide counterpoint to) a film’s political message? Do songs in the movie’s soundtrack themselves represent political commentary of some kind? If the soundtrack is mostly instrumental, how does the music reinforce political messaging—are certain characters or events associated with particular musical themes? For example, it is hard to miss the point of D.W. Griffith’s use of Richard Wagner’s famous “Ride of the Valkyries” in the climactic scene of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) when the Ku Klux Klan rides to the rescue. Almost sixty years later, Francis Ford Coppola inserted the same music now to ironic effect in *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

**Editing and Montage**

Although the editing of a movie’s individual shots is a key element of the art of a film, it may be difficult in practice to link to political themes. Nevertheless, you should consider how the way a film is put together might contribute to its political impact, if any. Many Hollywood films purposely contain very subtle editing that may be almost undetectable. But more artistically inclined directors typically use editing techniques to heighten the impact of their films. One variable to focus on is a movie’s editing pace, which refers to the rhythm of the flow of various
shots. Directors will sometimes use a choppy editing technique to create a sense of disorientation or confusion, as opposed to the smoother, more standard approach.

Try selecting a critical scene from the movie and carefully observe how it is put together. Is there a long, single shot or is it broken into many shorter ones? How does the cutting contribute to the feeling and meaning of the scene? In addition to pacing, pay attention to the juxtaposition of images edited together: how do these images forced together suggest similarity not obvious at first glance? Or how do they create tension in their strangeness to each other?

**Composition and Mise-en-scène**

Composition also is a typically subtle, yet important component of many movies. The way characters and objects are placed together in the frame of a film allows the director to achieve various sorts of commentary about its contents. Yet even in a formalistic movie, this is often done in such a way as to make us believe the frame occurred naturally. Obviously, composition may vary considerably over the course of a single movie, so you may want to select a critical scene for further analysis. Try pausing shots to isolate particular compositions. How does the way characters and objects are placed in the scene contribute to the director’s evaluation of them? Does this composition seem consistent with the movie’s political meanings? Pay particular attention to the placement of symbolically weighted objects such as guns or flags or badges.

**Lighting and Color**
We do not normally think about how directors alter and vary lighting in a movie, but as in real life, lighting can do much to affect the mood of a scene or our perception of characters. Dark lighting sets an ominous tone, suggesting danger or corruption; bright lighting seems safe or even happy. One of the easier lighting techniques to analyze is the use of color filters, which can make an entire scene appear to be drenched in a particular color. Does the film include the use of specific colors to comment on its characters and events? Typically, of course, white and lighter colors will signify goodness, but some directors may counter our expectations with other combinations. Some directors opt to shoot modern movies in black-and-white, in part because of the ways light can be manipulated in that medium. One memorable sequence of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) is shot in black-and-white, except for a little girl whose red coat is the only color. Spielberg uses these scenes to help establish how the title character begins to see the humanity in the Jewish victims of the German occupation of Poland.

**Camera Angles and Placement**

Directors use camera angles to accentuate how they want an audience to react to a given scene. Pay particular attention to how good and bad characters are viewed by the camera. When the camera is aimed down on characters, they may look threatened or submissive; conversely, if the camera looks up to characters, they may look dominating and even threatening. In the run of superhero movies after 2010, characters like Iron Man and Batman are seen in low-angle shots to emphasize their physical prowess and revved-up masculinity. Close-up shots, of course, tend to accentuate a character’s emotional condition or the importance of dialogue. A more remote camera tends to lessen the importance of the dialogue and focus our attention on action or an
interpretation of a character as alienated.

**Sets, Props, and Special Effects**

Careful viewing of the sets, props, and special effects in a movie is an excellent means of discerning whether the director is trying to achieve realism or a more expressive formalism. If the sets do not appear to be particularly realistic, try to imagine what the director is trying to achieve with the artificial setting. It might be part of an effort to make the message of the film less about the specific characters and more allegorical, for example. Special effects, of course, tend to be associated with action films and generally detract from the realism that might be associated with a more serious political message; however, the opposite may be true, as movies like *Natural Born Killers* are rife with artificial elements (animation, extreme camera movement, etc.) that seem intended to heighten the film’s messages.

**Product Placement**

Keep an eye out for recognizable brand names, particularly of consumer products. Do such products seem natural within the setting of the film or are they obvious attempts to help sell the product? Some directors use product placements ironically, perhaps to both comment on consumerism and distance the film from commercialism.

**Acting**
As discussed in Chapter 2, actors and acting can constitute an important part of a film’s political message. Consider, for example, the star power represented by Kevin Costner in *Thirteen Days* (2000). The movie is ostensibly about President Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, but Costner’s starring role as Kenneth P. O’Donnell makes it more of a tribute to the skills of the relatively unknown presidential aide. Actors, including their “star” status, roles, and names, should be scrutinized carefully for clues about a film’s political meaning.

**Casting**

Casting can provide some obvious cues about political messages. As noted in Chapter 2, some actors (e.g., Tom Hanks) seem to symbolize patriotism or traditional American virtues as construed by Hollywood. Others (e.g., Ben Affleck, George Clooney, Tim Robbins) are clearly identified with a more critical perspective and often participate in films with a similar mind-set. It is also possible that an actor or actress will be cast against type (e.g., Jane Fonda in the role of Nancy Reagan in *The Butler*, 2013).

**Characters**

Watch especially for roles that represent politicians, elected officials of any kind, bureaucrats, police officers, judges, and other government figures. Are they portrayed sympathetically or as negative stereotypes? Similarly, how are minorities and female characters portrayed, and how are they treated in the story line?
Names

Be sure to write down the names of key characters because directors often use symbolism in their choices of names. Reflect upon the possible connotations of the characters’ names and how the names might relate to the characters’ respective roles. In *Children of Men* (2006), the woman on whom the fate of humanity rests is named Kee (pronounced “key”) and her savior is Theo (Greek for “god”).

Distribution and Promotion

Take a look at the marketing for the movie—is it being promoted as a political movie or as something else? Is it receiving mass distribution or is it available for viewing only in certain cities (usually New York, Los Angeles, and a few others) and certain types of theaters? The answers to these questions will determine to what extent mass audiences are going to see the movie. At the same time, posters and trailers can provide clues to a filmmaker’s or at least a studio’s intentions by highlighting some aspects of a film and omitting others. The styling, font, and costuming featured in the poster for *American Hustle* (2013) emphasize its setting in the 1970s, during the Abscam political scandal on which the film is based. The poster’s arrangement of the main characters all in a line, from politician to FBI agent to con artists, suggests a moral equivalence among them, a theme emphasized in the tagline beneath their portrait: “Everyone hustles to survive.”

Viewing
If you see the movie in a cinema, try to be aware of how fellow attendees react to various parts of the movie. Is there any applause at key lines? Is there laughter at moments in the film that do not appear to be intentionally funny? Sometimes audiences clap at the end of the movie, which might signal explicit approval of political content in some instances. Consider, too, your own reactions to the movie. Did it make you feel good or bad, happy or sad, hopeful or cynical—particularly with respect to political phenomena?

**External Factors**

Contemporary students of political films have a trove of riches when it comes to researching how films have interacted with the political world. In addition to the many books and journals that address films and their political significance, the Internet provides a great deal of potentially useful information. Appendix 2 offers an introduction to film-related websites.

**Notes**


2. Ibid., p. 110.


4. Ibid., p. 69.