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Addressing Social Problems**

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper is focused on the role of motion pictures as a medium of public communication directed at addressing social problems and evoking a change in behaviour of the masses. From the moment the art of cinema was born in the late 19th century, films have served as an instrument of shifting public consciousness, i.e., inspiring social change, disseminating ideas and values, raising awareness of the acute social, cultural, and political issues etc. The purpose of this research is to consider, study, and analyse film production as: a) a form of reflecting significant sociopolitical processes and cultural innovations, as well as representing ideologies; and b) a mechanism that creates, forms, and shapes a new social reality.

Materials and Methods: The methodology of this research is based on content analysis and focused on the dynamics of cinematic response to the acute global issues, as well as development of social problem films as an instrument of public communication aimed at raising awareness and inspiring a change within society. The theory to be proved through this paper is that motion pictures have a major influencing power over human brain and social consciousness, and that this power can and has been applied to evoke large-scaled shifts in society.

Findings: To summarize the key findings, the content analysis of notable social problem film productions, their impact on the dynamics in public attitudes, and consequent changes in behaviour of the masses demonstrate the pattern of filmmakers' exponential progress in communicating social message to the target audience and, to a greater or lesser extent, managing to affect, shift, or even transform social reality.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: In order to support the proposed theory and expand the knowledge on "the formula" of success in influencing public mind through filmmaking, further research is required.

Keywords: *Public Communication, Filmmaking, Social Consciousness, Social Problems, Social Change, Political Propaganda*

Cinema as Communication Medium

In the light of its enormous potential for influencing society, the role of filmmaking as an instrument of public communication has always been surrounded by heated debates and controversy. Some researchers criticize the growing expansion of film production and its exponential impact on all spheres of human life and social activities, as, according to their point of view, film is primarily an entertaining image that does not require a deep intellectual processing for perception, and thus, generates passivity. At the same time, filmmaking is globally defined as the most large-scaled and impactful channel for promoting ideas, values, and ideologies within society. The exceptional power of motion pictures, comparing to other forms of visual arts, lies in their complex multi-level influence on the audience, particularly, via emotional involvement in the story and through resonating with characters. These elements ensure a film production's unprecedented potential for affecting social consciousness, values, and behaviour. Emerged at the end of the 19th century and introduced to wide audience by Lumière brothers, filmmaking has become much more than just a new form of information transmission or entertainment (Motion Picture Institute, 2023). Films serve both as a powerful medium of communication born as a result of centuries-long evolution of information transmission instruments and as a new form of art incorporating all elements of the history of arts and culture, particularly, visual arts, storytelling, literature, and theatre. Using the example of this multifaceted phenomenon, one can observe how development of technology and communication mediums influences methods and vectors of modern social system's operation.

Over the period of its development, cinema has undergone numerous significant changes, going from short, silent, black & white films to contemporary motion pictures with high-quality sound, advanced colour correction, and even three-dimensional resolution; as well as transforming from primitive attempts to catch objects movement on camera to getting to the essence of human character's contradictions, reconstructing historic events, and reflecting the complexity of social formation processes. Furthermore, the content was getting more and more sophisticated, starting from wide shots of an ordinary crowd and coming to the stage of Oscars-winning acting performances and artistic cinematographic choices. As filmmaking went through its evolution stages, the communicative possibilities of motion pictures kept growing exponentially. Information & communication revolution evoked by scientific and technological progress of the 20th century has resulted into fundamental changes in all spheres of social life (McLuhan, 2003). Filmmaking has played a significant role in these transformations. Some theorists believe that cinema has become a phenomenon that contributed to the processes of society's democratization, along with consolidation of its members, as well as the intense development of all sociocultural sphere as a whole. Others claim that popularization of entertaining motion pictures and other forms of mass screen culture provoked public degradation both in the field of communication and other spheres of social life. While expressive capabilities of films are still developing, the power of their social influence is already obvious.

It may take a funny, trivial form, such as temporary popularity of "Rachel's" haircut from the renowned TV series "Friends", (Crane & Kauffman, 1994) or it may lead to major social reforms, which has happened after release of the Oscars-winning film "Parasite" (Joon-Ho, 2019), when the South Korean authorities started a large-scale financing of a program for renovation of small apartments located in the basements of houses across the country (Sharf, 2020). The research is based on the method of content analysis aimed at assessing and interpreting the form and content of messages communicated through films. In addition, the

method of intent analysis is also applied to study the social meaning of communication. Social significance of films is defined by their classification within a system. While conceptualizing a “social problem” as a global issue associated with existing factors of social life that directly or indirectly influence the current state of society and require collective efforts to be effectively addressed, the following typology has been established. The list of global social issues includes: human rights, social justice, civil society development, corruption, military conflicts and their aftermath, environmental deterioration, animal rescue, prevention and treatment of socially significant diseases, disabilities and limitations on people suffering from them, untreatable or hardly treatable diseases, i.e., cancer, HIV, Alzheimer etc., limitations faced by elderly, mental health, drug use, discrimination, extremism and terrorism. The more successful attempts to evoke social, cultural, and political changes through filmmaking took place, the more this phenomenon fascinated social scientists and researchers. The theory to be supported through this study is that: a) society tends to be subjective to the influence of motion pictures; b) the extent of this influence always varies depending on many factors, including both a particular film production and its target audience; and c) the model of the most effective way of affecting the audience through filmmaking can be built based on the past precedents, which would mean a significant step forward in addressing global issues. Today’s society faces an overwhelming number of major challenges, such as wars, violence, intolerance, discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, orientation, religious and political beliefs, along with environmental pollution, climate change, deforestation, loss of species etc.

The list of global problems presenting a serious threat to the humankind is extensive and only keeps growing. If the theory that proposed in this research proves to work in practice, filmmaking as the most powerful form of visual storytelling can become one of the most influential tools in addressing global social challenges by raising public awareness and inspiring action. This study intends to identify the patterns of notable social problem film productions’ influence on social consciousness and behaviour of the masses, and build a hypothetical formula of successful impact of filmmaking on social reality based on these patterns. If this formula turns out to be effective when put in practice, it will create an unprecedented potential for bringing a positive change to society, contributing to increased level of individual and collective responsibility, and inspiring thoughtfulness, consideration, tolerance, and action taken to contribute to solving some of the most large-scaled social challenges of the 21st century.

Previous Research

In the context of mass media and communication, motion pictures serve as an instrument of influencing society, possessing such characteristics as mass appeal, technical mediation, and multi-channel nature (Fedotova, 2003). As such, they perform a wide range of socially significant functions. One of the most famous theorists in sociology of communication of the mid-20th century, H. Lasswell has identified the three most important functions of any communication form in social context: a) “observing the environment”, b) “identifying the correlation between social groups when responding to the environmental changes”, c) “transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another” (Lasswell, 1948). As a general rule, the phenomenon of cinema and its influencing power was considered either from the semiotics point of view or through the prism of aesthetic research. In the context of this research, the most interesting and relevant theory is socio-philosophical analysis of cinema as an instrument of communication proposed by H. M. McLuhan and J. Baudrillard, which reflects its substantial social influence. According to H. M. McLuhan, the emergence of cinema took

place due to the entry of the humankind into a new era: the “slow”, “mechanic” culture of writing has been replaced by a completely different one, generated by advanced technologies, a high-speed culture based on the merge and interconnection of everything with everything (McLuhan, 2003).

This new culture keeps expanding human abilities, as well as abolishing spatial and temporal boundaries. The new forms of mass media and communication, which have emerged in response to demands of modern times, have managed to make an unprecedentedly significant impact on all aspects of social reality. According to McLuhan, collective spoken communication has become less valuable within the framework of print culture (McLuhan, 2003). A contradistinction took place between educated, intellectually sophisticated part of society and illiterate part of the population, while publishing books and magazines in different national languages increased cross-cultural gaps within nations. Emergence of cinema, television, and radio, on the contrary, contributed to unity. McLuhan was convinced that the formation of new, global, multidimensional communication space united all members of global community and enabled equal participation in modern communication process. According to McLuhan’s classification, films belong to the so-called “hot” means of communication that provide the audience – “the consumers” – with an extensive information, at the same time minimizing the required level of participation in communication process, thus, turning the target audience into “passive consumers” that are supposed to merely perceive proposed ideas without questioning them (McLuhan, 2003). J. Baudrillard’s judgments about the role of filmmaking in society are quite contradictory, and, based on them, it is difficult to give an unambiguous definition of such socially significant phenomenon as cinema. If we rely on his concept of social reality’s division into “the false” (what’s associated with simulation) and “the true” (what’s based on sacred), the cinema should be considered as a dual phenomenon, which combines features of the opposite social aspects (Baudrillard, 1970).

On the one hand, filmmakers produce an extensive number of meaningless, hyperreal images, which, along with other anti-communicative media, merely simulate and “replace” many spheres of social existence, and thus, contribute to socio-cultural regress. On the other hand, being a significant form of art, cinema is a phenomenon of mythical nature, and, thus, is directly related to the sphere of the sacred and irrational, which is devalued within modern society, but is necessary for the latter to restore the correct principles of existence. The “big screen” offers images that seem to give the audience a comprehensive picture of reality. In fact, according to J. Baudrillard, this tendency to impose concepts and society’s inclination towards thoughtless consumption of images leads to disappearance of the real, unique world as such, as it loses both its content and its value (Baudrillard, 1970). Baudrillard believed that it leads to making the humanity exist exclusively in the space of images that replace “the metalanguage of the absent reality” (Baudrillard, 1970). Thus, according to Baudrillard, illusions produced by media technologies distance people from the real, living world (Baudrillard, 1970). Moreover, television, advertising and cinema form a distorted alternative reality, which strongly affects social consciousness, as well as the entire system of social relations. It goes without saying that the function of any media channel is not limited to the mere transmission of information; on the contrary, their primary purpose is to present the facts from the desired angle, evaluate and interpret these facts in a specific way, change its historical or social status, give certain phenomenon greater importance, or vice versa, make it look insignificant.

Thanks to the rich variety of methods for manipulating public consciousness through a specific way of interpreting information, journalists, writers, directors, and other communicators are

able to depict any event in any light and impose any global picture or worldview. Baudrillard called it "the essence of mass media development" (Baudrillard, 1970). It is not just a set of technical means for disseminating informative content, it is a highly effective method of imposing specific picture of the world. In addition to providing entertaining content, media channels also persistently offer new forms of perceiving reality. The modern approach to social impact of film content is called "Social Impact Entertainment", also known as SIE (Barker & Sabido, 2005). It is anchored in the concept of media content creation focused on harnessing its entertainment potential to generate social impact. Theoretical basis of SIE has been brightly expressed in the works of Sabido and Barker. In the 70s, Sabido came up with a "theory of the tone" that identified patterns of dependence: the extent of communicative effect of a film on the audience directly depends on actors' body language, facial expressions, and voices, which generate emotional resonance (Barker & Sabido, 2005). Sabido categorized mental processes as a) instinctive, b) emotional, and c) intellectual, thus, demonstrating that acting is capable of strengthening each of these processes by connecting them to each other (Barker & Sabido, 2005). In their works, Sabido and Barker demonstrated the distribution of tonality in the genre of melodrama, linking it with the nature of characters and their functional role in the development of the plot. Protagonists and antagonists, whose roles don't change throughout the plot, demonstrate certain forms of social behaviour that are either suitable or unsuitable for solving a specific problem. According to the social learning theory, they are to get either "rewards" or "punishment" for their behavioural strategy (Barker & Sabido, 2005). There are also the so-called "transitional" characters, as a general rule, protagonists, which evolve from bad to good as the plot unfolds, coming from failures and rejection (punishment) to success and empathy (reward).

The audience tends to relate themselves with the characters and resonate with them, considering the characters' journeys as their own and using this experience as the basis for their own behavioural strategy, seeing a protagonist as the role model. Naturally, the more powerfully a character is written in a script and played by an actor, the more likely the audience is to relate to him (or her). Although this methodology is clearly eclectic and has been criticized by academic community, the approach has been adapted by the Vermont-based Population Media Centre (PMC), a non-profit organization that uses entertaining and educational content to change attitudes and behaviours related to health and well-being and improve the effectiveness of entertainment education in 20 countries across the world. As such, the system proposed by Sabido was named the PMC methodology (Barker & Sabido, 2005). Its theoretical block is consistently being developed and improved. For instance, PMC publications draw on the research on the dynamics of group social norms, particularly, the research on the turning points in the processes of group interactions when what used to be minorities' normative beliefs becomes dominant in society (Andries et al., 2016). The tendency to identify and resonate with characters in a film, along with emotional involvement in the problem portrayed on screen, which is typical for any forms of artistic video content, ensures a more effective shift in social knowledge, values and behavioural attitudes (Baezconde-Garba et al., 2013). Filmmaking enables society to transcend the boundaries of given reality and look at everyday life and global issues from a broader perspective.

Not only the art of cinema allows to capture individual social processes and phenomena, but it also provides the opportunity to change or alter the perception of the acute social problems. This unique specificity may be used with either the best or the worst intentions, and its desired effect has been historically ranging from raising awareness, promoting tolerance, and evoking

positive socio-cultural change (i.e., addressing such significant issues as racism, homophobia, gender discrimination, bullying at schools etc. via social problem films) to manipulating society into fatal delusions in the interests of totalitarian regimes leaders (i.e., depicting an opposing political party or neighbour state as “the enemy”, blackening the image of certain ethnic, social, or political groups), as described in Schmitt’s “The Concept of the Political” (Schmitt, 1932). The influencing power of cinema has been a subject of interest for both social activists and political technologists since the emergence of filmmaking (Mazierska, 2014). However, the previous research has been mostly concentrated on separate specific precedents, genres, and time periods. What’s missing from this field of study to date and requires more investigation in the future is a comprehensive comparative analysis of the entire history of filmmaking, starting from Lumière brothers and ending with the most recent productions in all countries and regions, which would provide a much more accurate and detailed information to understand which film productions succeed in affecting society, and how much, which fail, and why. The more research is made in this sector, the more precise patterns can be identified, and the more effective models of “the right” way of communicating social message through films can be developed.

Social Change Films and Their Impact on Culture and Society: Content Analysis

In order to research the effect of filmmaking on social consciousness in practice, a number of social change film productions taking place in different regions and time periods have been considered and discussed. The aim of this analysis is to identify the factors that make the target audience more (or less) likely to be influenced by a social message communicated via motion pictures and build a hypothetical model of filmmaking process that has the highest chances of bringing significant positive change to social reality.

Social Change Films and Their Impact on Culture and Society: Origins

The first attempts to impact public mind via motion pictures took place as early as in 1896 when Lumière brothers consciously incorporated images of Sunlight soap into their film in attempt to increase the brand’s popularity (Lehu, 2007). It has become the first historic record of both embedded marketing and the use of a film as a channel of communication conveying a message to influence the audience. Several decades later, filmmakers all over the world were actively applying the influencing power of cinema ensured by its emotional appeal and resonance, as an instrument of shifting social consciousness and changing social reality (Paiva, 2022). One of the brightest early examples of filmmakers’ attempts to make a change through motion pictures is the iconic anti-war political satire “The Great Dictator” by Charlie Chaplin (Chaplin, 1940). The film has become one of the most culturally significant public condemnations of fascism, antisemitism, totalitarianism, and dictatorship; and was aimed at inspiring the spirit of democracy, liberty, brotherhood, love and care for each other, which was particularly remarkable considering the timing – the middle of World War II (Chaplin, 1940). “The Great Dictator” has been selected for preservation in the US National Film Registry by the Library of Congress due to its cultural, historic, and aesthetic value in 1977, and is still considered as one of the most major and significant contributions to the history of cinematography (Barber, 2021).

Furthermore, New York Times called it “perhaps the most significant film ever produced” (Crowther, 1940), while, when being released in France in 1945, “The Great Dictator” was the most popular film of the year (Wood, 2017). What Chaplin managed to achieve with his message conveyed through “The Great Dictator” was inspiring a cultural change, including

increased ethical sensitivity, raised awareness, and most importantly, a sparkle of hope within society. Another iconic motion picture selected for preservation in the US National Film Registry for its socio-cultural significance, a comedy “His Girl Friday” (Hawks, 1940), has played an instrumental role in the evolution of public and media image of a woman’s role in social life and professional environment. The film was focused on the “career vs family” dilemma that women of the early 20th century have been facing. Having a successful career often meant giving up traditional family life, and vice versa. Modern and conservative, career- and family-oriented life goals seemed nearly impossible to combine. While feminist movements all over the world encouraged female professionals to pursue their career aspirations just as men do, the image of a woman in mass culture was usually reflected as stereotypical romantic interest or passive co-star who might have certain meaning for male characters but lacked one’s own journey, purpose, and development (Herrero, 2021). “His Girl Friday” (Hawks, 1940) has revolutionized the standards of a woman’s image in cinema, turning bold, independent female protagonists with successful careers, educated opinion, and active position into the role models for new generations.

The film also drew public attention to all challenges and internal conflicts that women face when struggling to balance their aspirations to both a fulfilling career and a happy family life, and being forced to choose one over the other, thus, evoking a significant shift in cultural values and social image of female working professionals (Walters, 2008). Another significant focus of social problem cinema covers the so-called “enforced social values” and their devastating effect on mental health of those who struggle to fit in the rigid frameworks. This was powerfully illustrated in the award-winning drama “Dead Poets Society” (Weir, 1989), where the plot follows an internal struggle of elite boarding school students trying to go against the heavy pressure to comply with conservative norms imposed by their parents and teachers, and forced to give up any outside-the-box ideas, passions, and inspirations, and meet the strict social expectations at any cost. The film has raised many debates on the appropriateness of trying to force younger generations into sharing the values and ideals of their parents, and successfully managed to bring the problem of cross-generational misunderstanding to the centre of public attention, as well as inspire cross-cultural dialogue and encourage more liberal parenting models based on paying more attention to individual interests, desires, and choices of youth (Buckmaster, 2019).

The problem of discrimination towards ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities, racism, and mass inclination to consider anything that seems different as “wrong” has been the central topic of social problem films since their origin. “Philadelphia” (Demme, 1993) has become one of the most socially significant films that addresses homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation. It was the first feature film that brought public attention to the topic of HIV and AIDS, the stigma that people suffering from these diseases face, and the severity of prejudice and bias that the entire “non-straight” percentage of population has to deal with (Population Media Centre, 2024). What’s more, “Philadelphia” has managed to achieve a remarkable shift in social consciousness and triggered a substantial increase of tolerance and open-mindedness as a social norm (Buffam, 2011).

Another bright example of this period is a feature crime drama “American History X” (Kaye, 1998), which demonstrates all the tragedy and cruelty of racial hatred passed from generation to generation and leading to a never-ending circle of violence. A year after the film’s release, Amnesty International USA has included “American History X” into the national educational campaign, and started screening it in schools and colleges, as well as during a wide range of

nationwide educational and cultural events with a purpose of raising awareness of the problem of racial and ethnic discrimination and the importance of human rights protection (Joudrey, 2023). Throughout the 20th century, motion pictures have played a significant role in addressing global social issues and fostering a change; it can be argued that the input that social change films made into evoking a positive shift exceeds the results achieved by all other forms of social campaigns (Dhungana, 2024).

Social Change Films and Their Impact on Culture and Society: Development

By the beginning of the 21st century filmmakers all over the world have already been well-aware of the influencing power of motion pictures, and cinema has become one of the most popular forms of conveying a social message (Tan, 2018). One of the brightest examples of social problem films of 2000s became a dystopian political thriller “V for Vendetta” (McTeigue, 2005). The film focuses on the permanently acute topic of relationships between the government and people, their political freedoms, human rights, and how they are exercised (or not) under a certain political regime, paying a particular attention to such themes as dictatorship, fascism, political propaganda, information wars exercised via mass media, and authorities’ abuse of powers directed at ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities (Munywoki, 2020). “V for Vendetta” raised heated debates in society, became one of the top popular movies to discuss in higher educational institutions, especially as a part of law and politics majors, and was marked by substantial number of parallels and allusions to historic events, i.e., Third Reich, Gunpowder Plot of 1605 etc., as well as iconic literature compositions, i.e., The Count of Monte Cristo (Dumas, 1844), Nineteen Eighty-Four (Orwell, 1949), The Phantom of the Opera (Leroux, 1909) etc. (Ebert, 2006).

As a general pattern, the issues that filmmakers were trying to address in 2000s and 2010s started getting more narrow and specific comparing to the 20th century. As the 21st century was unfolding, the focus of the majority of social problem films that used to be put on broad and generalized topics has moved to more “niche” categories. For instance, in 2007, following the incident of mass shooting committed by 15 years olds in American high school, an Estonian director Ilmar Raag came up with a feature drama “The Class” (Raag, 2007). The film is concentrated on the problem of bullying in schools, and the danger of its psychological effect on the victims, along with the risk of fatal consequences of a failure to pay attention to harassment among teenagers in time. In his interview, Raag noted that the students responsible for the shooting have been subjected to bullying and harassment from their classmates for several years before the tragedy took place, which may mean that it could have been avoided if more attention had been paid to the problem in time (Hermans, 2009). Raag’s efforts to raise awareness of the issue paid off: Estonian educational institutions started actively including “The Class” into compulsory school program.

Teachers all over the country brought their classes to movie theatres to watch the film, and organized subsequent discussions, while schools started actively hiring mental health advisors, which has never been a trend before (Hermans, 2009). 2011 was marked by the launch of the now-iconic television series “Black Mirror” (Brooker, 2011-2023) that mock and emphasise modern society’s issues related to the mass dependence on electronic devices, social media, and artificial intelligence, as well as ethically ambiguous impact of new-generation technologies on humanity. According to multiple researchers, although Brooker’s series are depicted as dystopian sci-fi set in the future, and the extent of technologies’ control over sociopolitical life is exaggerated, the issues he addresses are certainly present in today’s society,

and the reality he paints has a lot to do with the current state of society rather than merely a distant future (Sculos, 2017). “Black Mirror” went viral across the world and drew major public attention to social, mental, psychological, political, scientific, and ethical issues addressed in the thought-provoking series, as well as inspired a significantly wide cross-cultural audience to reflect on contemporary values, ideologies, and social settings. While most commonly, social change films communicate their message through fictional storytelling, there are also many directors who choose a more straightforward format of documentaries.

Following the shocking events of the 2015 Ile-de-France terrorist attacks, particularly, mass shooting in Charlie Hebdo newspaper editorial office, French directors Emmanuel and Daniel Leconte released a documentary film “Je Suis Charlie” (Leconte & Leconte, 2015), which tells the story of the victims and investigates the aftermath of the tragedy, and how it has affected the entire nation. “Je Suis Charlie” drew global attention to the threat that professionals working in mass media sector are constantly exposed to, as well as related complications with exercising the freedom of press. According to UNESCO’s freedom of expression report, the number of journalists being killed on duty grows exponentially since 2014 (statistics from UNESCO’s official website). Leconte brothers’ film has become an iconic example of sociopolitical documentaries directed at raising awareness within society and attempting to trigger an action within governmental structures.

The motto “Je suis Charlie” (French for “I am Charlie”) has become a symbol of freedom of speech across the world. Having been translated to many languages, it is now commonly used when censorship is enforced through violence, and someone suffers harm for exercising the freedom of expression. For instance, the murder of Russian journalist Boris Nemtsov who has been shot to death soon after his criticism towards Vladimir Putin’s regime was followed by a strike under the “Je suis Boris” motto (Walker, 2015). A similar hashtag, “Je Suis Navalny” was globally used during the social media campaign condemning the killing of Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny who died in political prison under suspicious circumstances after several years of being tortured, starved, and denied access to medical help (Stepancev, 2024). The film by Emmanuel and Daniel Leconte was presented at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival, and immediately nominated in several categories, particularly, for the F:ACT Award at the 2015 Copenhagen International Documentary Festival, and later, for the Best Documentary Award at the 2016 Jerusalem Film Festival.

Social Change Films and Their Impact on Culture and Society: Present

The 2020s were marked by turning communication through film, as well as other video storytelling forms into a global trend. Instagram reels have become the most popular form of public engagement strategies, both in marketing agencies and governmental organizations like UN, UNESCO, WHO etc. (Bakhtiary & Behzadi, 2023). The influencing power, emotional appeal, and memorable images of video content inspired an unprecedented number of films addressing global issues being released each month and highlighting all sorts of the acute social, political, cultural, environmental, and other major-level problems from the vulnerability of today’s society to the threat of pandemics to the abuse of powers exercised by authorities in countries with dictatorial regimes. A bright example is dozens of films inspired by COVID-19 outbreak. Following the Coronavirus lockdown, filmmakers all over the world started coming up with films focused on the topic of quarantine. Many of these pictures were filmed during the COVID lockdown, and thus, their format was specially changed to fit the “stay home” order’s regulations. For instance, the series “Cursed Days” (Slepakov, 2020), that were focused

on all the subtleties of life under the lockdown, have been filmed in the middle of COVID pandemic with cast members rehearsing over zoom and shooting their scenes on their own smartphones, in their own apartments, and later transferring the footage to editorial team online.

The series aimed to inspire global society, encourage people to stay mentally well and motivated during the hardest stages of the lockdown, both by coming up with relatable, resonating, and yet funny quarantine stories, and by indicating that since even filmmaking can still exist under the new social reality, other activities of “normal” life can also be altered for the new format of COVID regulations (Dolgopolov, 2021). Another exponentially developing theme of films directed at social change is political cinema. The Oscar-winning documentary “Navalny” by Daniel Roher (Roher, 2022) focused on the investigation of Alexei Navalny’s poisoning with a Novichok nerve agent allegedly ordered by Kremlin and executed by Russian Federal Security Service managed to draw global attention to consistent violations of human rights and de-facto authoritarian regime in de-jure democratic Russia (Allsop, 2023). The documentary’s main goal was fighting the censorship and oppression of independent mass media in Russia, attempting to hold the authorities accountable, and inspiring people both in and outside Russia to take action against Putin’s regime (Wilkinson, 2024). “Navalny” won an Oscar in the category Best Documentary Feature at the 95th Academy Awards, as well as several other awards as a Best Political Documentary. As the international community of filmmakers all over the world continues to address the issue of discrimination, bias, and stereotypes based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and orientation, the form of social change storytelling adjusts and re-shapes in accordance with today’s consumers demands.

Since “light” films belonging to the entertaining mass culture category cover a substantially wider audience than heavily intellectual, “serious” cinema aimed at educating rather than entertaining, filmmakers started actively seeking for compromises and incorporating socially, culturally, and politically significant themes into popular franchises, blockbusters, action movies, and family comedies. For instance, the film “Barbie” (Gerwig, 2020), both title and poster of which assume exclusively a fantastic comedy targeted at younger audience, in fact, contains a number of deep philosophical themes, raises multiple existential questions, and mocks consumer society’s values, gender stereotypes, patriarchal social settings, and radical feminism. While keeping the entertaining form, Gerwig’s film addresses a variety of important themes related to the role of both women and men in today’s world, gender-based social expectations and imposed social scripts that every member of society is aggressively encouraged to follow. The film aspires to raise awareness, provoke critical thinking, and inspire a change in relation to such acute social issues as unrealistic standards (i.e., beauty, success, career, income, intangible property, parenthood, attitudes etc.) that people living in contemporary society are expected to meet at all costs, lack of autonomy, and fear of severe social judgement for stepping outside the rigid frameworks (Abdedaim, 2024). What generally marks 2020s as a period of filmmaking in the socio-cultural context is a global trend of responding to every existing or emerging issue, phenomenon, or event of major significance with communicating social messages through cinema.

Influencing Mechanisms of Cinematic Storytelling: Neuro-Effects

The techniques designed to influence social consciousness via cinematic storytelling are based on triggering the so-called “collective mental programming” (Hofstede et al., 2010). Unlike other forms of transmitting information, not only storytelling engages the part of a brain that is responsible for language processing and comprehension, but it also influences the sectors of cortex responsible for perception of colours, shapes, movements, sounds, scents etc. (FeluiMojer et al., 2018). What’s more, it involves highly complex cognitive processes that engage a brain in every possible way and trigger the release of neurochemicals, such as dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin, which evoke empathy, make one relate to the story on personal level, have a strong impact on mind, and shape behaviours (Felui-Mojer et al., 2018). Unlike traditional social campaigns, not only films inform, but they also evoke a strong emotional response, make the audience experience powerful feelings, laugh, cry, and go through the entire emotional palette of characters they are watching on screen. This way motion pictures create the so-called “cognitive shortcuts” between the images in motion pictures and strong emotions, whether positive or negative (Perloff, 2003).

Furthermore, being a particularly engaging and entertaining form of communication, films can keep the audience’s attention for 1,5 to 3 hours, while few people would claim an interest in spending the same amount of time on getting familiarized with dry facts from brochures dedicated to global issues. Another significant specificity of video storytelling is its uniquely strong effect on long-term memory, which opens a potential for the audience to remember information subconsciously, effortlessly, and get more educated by simply watching an entertaining film (Felui-Mojer et al., 2018). This effect can be equally used for either raising awareness of real facts within society or manipulating the target audience into sharing a subjective point of view proposed by a filmmaker, thus, “mentally programming” masses for having certain attitudes to the problem posed in a motion picture (Hofstede et al., 2010). This interesting cognitive mechanism has been widely applied by social activists, political

technologists, and marketers since the emergence of cinema as a form of art and communication.

Influencing Mechanisms of Cinematic Storytelling: Evolution

As described above, throughout the history of cinema, the patterns of social problem films kept getting more and more complex and intricate. Filmmakers of the 20th century tended to address wider problematic areas (i.e., war vs peace, human rights and freedoms vs abuse of powers, tolerance and equality vs discrimination) and communicate their message to society as a whole, usually, sticking to the genre of drama and focusing on educating the audience, appealing to their feelings, and evoking emotional response. The beginning of the 21st century was marked by narrowing down the focus of social problem films, getting more specific, and targeting particular audiences. By 2020s, filmmakers developed a common trend to make even films focused on the most serious issues “light” and entertaining, in attempt to attract a wider audience and ensure that their message reaches as many social groups as possible, while also tending to ensure the topic discussed in a motion picture is as acute as possible at the moment of release (i.e., pandemic is promptly followed by quarantine-centred content, political events immediately get reflected on screen, and so do social trends etc.).

Influencing Mechanisms of Cinematic Storytelling: Response

The question that inevitably arises is what the factors that make some groups more perceptive to a message communicated through cinema than others are. The hypothesis based on Hofstede’s “cultural dimensions” suggests that the audience’s cultural settings (Hofstede et al., 2010) have a direct impact on their readiness to buy into idea conveyed through motion pictures. Although it goes without saying that every human being’s reaction to any message expressed in any form is individual, personal, and a subject to many factors, some general patterns still can be identified. Usually, the cultures that are most likely to be affected by social problem films are the ones with lower power distance and uncertainty avoidance indexes (Hofstede et al., 2010), that’s cultures where open discussions of the acute social, political, and economic problems that affect masses are a norm, and thus, society tends to be more open to consider different opinions and points of view, even provocative ones. Cultures with higher power distance and uncertainty avoidance inclination (Hofstede et al., 2010), especially the ones under authoritarian regimes, on the contrary, are less likely to be affected by filmmakers, especially if the message of a film contradicts the mindset imposed by society, community, or government, or if a film addresses a problem that ruling authorities are not willing to admit or hear about.

Besides, individualistic cultures are more likely to respond to a non-standard opinion or outside-the-box point of view expressed in a film comparing to collectivistic ones (Hofstede et al., 2010). Although all of the above are only general, theoretical trends that still need further comprehensive research to be verified, and even then, all cross-cultural tendencies always have plenty of exceptions, it’s important to bear in mind that cultural settings may play a significant role in public perception of cinema as an instrument of communication. Thus, the key for a filmmaker’s message to reach more people and inspire significant changes is being aware of the target audience’s cultural settings, as well as interests and preferences in cinematic genres, and taking all these factors into consideration.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dynamics of social problem films development demonstrates a tendency of cinematic arts to respond to the acute global issues taking place around the filmmakers. The more significant events happening within social, cultural, and political landscape are, the more they get reflected in motion pictures aimed at raising awareness and inspiring a positive change. Judging from the history of social problem cinema, as it evolves, the issues to be addressed tend to narrow down from general, broad problems (i.e., war, discrimination, cross-cultural conflicts) to specific, niche issues (i.e., bullying in high schools, life under the lockdown, specific political events). More recent social problem films also tend to respond to the issues considered the most acute at the time of production, while earlier attempts to address global problems seemed to be more “timeless”. Another tendency of social problem cinema development is a constantly evolving ability of filmmakers to adjust to popular trends, permanently changing industry standards, and preferences of the target social groups, thus, striving to reach a wider audience. Being substantially more competitive than back in the day, contemporary filmmaking sector poses much more challenges for directors and producers. The main one is an ability to attract, engage, and involve the target audience from the stage of film promotion to the final titles on screen. Filmmakers all over the world are constantly competing in their capability of keeping the audience engaged, both with each other and with other channels of mass communication. Another essential challenge is finding the right balance between making a film entertaining enough to gain popularity within masses and actually conveying the intended socially significant message. Films with the strongest entertaining component successfully manage to reach a wide audience, but often get less of emotional response and tend to fail in communicating a specific idea. At the same time, stories with a strong emotional and intellectual content that successfully manage to affect the audience often end up being seen by very narrow, elitist groups only. Thus, the cornerstone of bringing actual positive change to society through cinema is finding the intricate balance between the form and content of filmmakers’ message. The implications of researching this field have a potential of bringing significant contributions to the global effort in addressing the most acute social issues. By analysing precedents where motion pictures have had a considerable effect on social consciousness, public attitudes, and behaviour of the masses through the history of filmmaking and across the globe, it is possible to identify the specific patterns demonstrating which factors are or aren’t likely to make a film production more impactful for which target audience. This study sheds light on some of these patterns, which is the first step on the way to have enough data to build an effective model of successfully communicating a message and inspiring a change within the audience. However, further research is required to get more comprehensive, accurate, and detailed information on all kinds of social problem film productions in all countries and regions, within all social groups, and under all kinds of political regimes. If this hypothetical model proves to work in practice, it will bring unprecedented opportunities for applying filmmaking as a highly impactful medium of public communication that succeeds in addressing global social problems by raising public awareness, provoking consideration, and inspiring individual and collective responsibility for taking action and fostering a positive shift.

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