"I have no message […] Messages don't interest me" (Sarah Maldoror). To what extent do literary, cinematic or artistic works have political 'messages'?

Winning essay by Ernest Lee

"How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fever. Sounds familiar?"

- Flyer circulated within the Pentagon, promoting a 27 August 2003 screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (dir. Gillo Pontecorvo, 1967)[1]

"THE FILM REJECTS THE STATEMENT BY AHMED DIRANI THAT MARX WAS WRONG!"

- Title card, *A Feeling Greater Than Love* (dir. Mary Jirmanus Saba, 2017)[2]

Cinematic works, like other artistic forms, do not merely serve to entertain or aesthetically please. They are a form of political discourse in themselves, seeking to describe, interpret and critically examine political life. Films demystify existing power relations within society, expand our understanding of political analysis, and even precipitate political change and practices, even when artists did not explicitly, or even intentionally, seek to be political; in contrast, artists attempting to exert political influence all too often fail. An approach of close-reading numerous individual films, while illuminating numerous culturally and politically-specific critiques, may very well fail to engage with the contention that particular filmmakers have *no* message. Rather, this essay examines the political 'messages' of cinematic works, paying close attention to the medium of cinema itself: as more than the sum of its parts (script, acting, soundtrack), as well as its socially-embedded processes of screening, distribution and censorship. Films' varied genres, each with particular thematic concerns, audience expectations, even epistemological demands (particularly in the case of documentaries) make evaluating the extent of political 'messages' within cinema challenging. I first historicize my evaluation by analysing European political documentary cinema, whose creators were explicitly concerned with questioning and changing political and social structures. Despite their concern with capturing everyday life, they sought to

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[1] Riegler 2009
[2] Quoted in Marks 2020

establish entirely new ways of society and political life. I then examine 'propagandistic' cinematic works, whose political 'messages' may be expected to be most overt and one-dimensional, yet reveal how the specific cinematic formats of socialism's various historical incarnations lend themselves to both politico-aesthetic theorising, as well as institutional practices and discourses. Even when expected to be heavy-handed, many of these films were not merely state mouthpieces, but creatively and autonomously articulated their messages. Bearing in mind that 'messages' are not simply transmitted from speaker to recipient, from film to watcher, but should be discursively understood, I turn to political war films to understand how their messages were variously interpreted, focusing on the popular afterlives of these films. Filmmakers, like other artists, do not possess a monopoly over understanding their work. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on the theoretical possibilities of the medium of cinema for politics.

Political messages and values are evident even in the earliest works of political documentary cinema, although the means through which they envisioned mass political and social change varied with the ideological backgrounds of filmmakers and their directors. Dziga Vertov's silent *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) was a significant departure from conventions, lacking actors, with a focus on industrial machinery, daily routines of work and play of Soviet city-dwellers, and the self-reflexive featuring of its own camera crew. Devoid of dialogue, full of novel, fast-paced cuts, and lacking even a fixed musical score[3], the film's presentation of life and its rhythms is phenomenological in nature. For Vertov, facts materially and mechanically produced on a film screen helped unite art and life amidst rapid Soviet industrialization, mobilizing workers, intellectuals and manufacturers alike towards building the future."[4] Vertov himself was keenly aware of modern cinema's unique potential in doing so, identifying "Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt, the acted nonacted; making falsehood into truth. ... Kino-eye as the union of science with newsreel to further the battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on

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[3] The film would have been screened to the accompaniment of live music within the cinema. Since in the last 4 decades alone it has been re-released to no less than 24 different soundtracks, each of course evoking a different mood and complementing the film's themes differently.
[4] Guerin 2008: 123

the screen—Film-truth."[5] The political role of the artist or filmmaker was envisaged as part of the great number of workers who would together build a new way of socialist life. Guerin argues that film was also not merely the inspiration or enabler for political watersheds like the end of communism in Europe, but that these "representations … *are* the material reality of their aspirations"[6]. Contra Marxist-materialist views that fundamentally upheld the potential of the 'revolutionary image' to agitate audiences and incite revolutions, the various 'committed documentaries' of late 20th-century Europe served as 'working tools' for revolutionaries. These documentaries were declarations of solidarity with ongoing currents of radical political transformation, and their filmmakers engaged with political change. For Romanians in 1989, the lines between cinema, television, and daily life blurred, with the images broadcast by the National Salvation Front clearly disinterested from past theorising about film, realism (as a socialist form) and the ethical implications of 'truth' and film. Also gone was the filmmaker-as-artist. Rather, a society undergoing breakdown began to privilege publicly broadcast images as "supposedly transparent windows onto the reality of events as they happened"[7]. The allure of visual evidence of the depravities of the Ceauşescu regime, from their torture chambers, personal riches, and propaganda outlets were all paraded live as evidence of the despotic and monstrous character of the Ceauşescus. These images served as a popular call to arms against the authoritarian communist state, their authenticity undergirded in the amateurish, shaky, mistake-filled footage of the handheld camera. In contrast to Vertov's filmmaking techniques – his pioneering camera angles, editing techniques and exposures were attention-grabbing, serving to emphasize that it was a deliberate, intentional, artistic work – here, the medium's capacity to enthral and motivate arose from how they were "raw, immediate and flawed", obeying the rhythms of political chaos and developments rather than any intellectual logic.[8]

The complex relationship between filmmaking and institutional patronage have influenced how cinema functions as a medium for political propaganda. The specific cinematic formats,

[5] Dziga Vertov, "The Birth of Kino-Eye," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 41–42.
[6] Guerin 2008: 116. Emphasis mine.
[7] Guerin 2008: 147
[8] Guerin 2008: 147. I am reminded of Susan Sontag's observation that "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (2002: 3), although Sontag was instead commenting on photography's service *towards* the support of socialist ideologies.

inventions, and genres employed in support of regimes were not merely reflective of or a cipher for totalitarian messages, but had to navigate a "double-bind of macro-politics … and the micro-politics of a filmmaker's desire for an autonomous voice as well as the motivations of national cinema and international recognition"[9]. The messages of 'Defa-futurist' films from the former German Democratic Republic now seemed obscure, given today's political climate of an 'embarrassed silence' and suppression of East German cultural politics. Yet cine-futurism as a cinematic mode owes much to the GDR, where cybernetics and scientific logic were creatively connected to politics. Within the Cold-War context, defa-futurist films such as *Love in the Year 2002* (1972, dir. Joachim Hellwig and Claus Ritter) or *Narrations from the Real World* (1968, dir. Joachim Hellwig) were concerned with the development of a socialist society through cybernetics, engaging with themes like labor, love, food supply, and creative thinking. The latter is a 'cine-commemoration' of Marx's 150th birthday, a celebration of proletarian internationalism that reported on East German ties to Ghana, while in another sequence its commentary speculates on future scientific development, optimistic of new technology's impact on humankind. Makers of the "socialist future film" were conscious of "the necessity of the documentary to unlock new regions of reality" while still "seeking for the best communication of our artistic intentions" through cinema[10]. However, fully understanding how these political messages were conditioned requires a biographical understanding of the filmmakers' ambivalent relationship to the regime. Stasi records reveal many divergences from state directions, and competing visions over how, where, and for whom their cinematic messages should be heard[11]. The filmmakers of the defa-futurism movement help break down a simple dichotomy of artists from 'the East' as either dissidents or social conformists, moving beyond Cold War discursive legacies. Even during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where films like *Spring Sprouts* (春苗, 1975) and *Denouncement* (决裂, 1975) have been rightfully characterized as bare-faced attacks on the political enemies of Jiang Qing, the structure of the cinematic industry and pressures for 'political correctness' did not always led to the political messages expected by rulers. Thematically, films produced between

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[9] Mende 2020
[10] From Ritter and Hellwig's unpublished joint dissertation, written 1975. Quoted in Mende 2020
[11] One Stasi report from October 31, 1973, remarks on the "conspicuous attention" aroused by Hellwig the 1973 International Short Film Festival at Oberhausen , and draw attention to his illegal exports of *Love in the Year 2002* to Oberhausen in an attempt to include the work in their programme. At other times, he appropriates Marxist language to defend his own presentation of the film, warning against "Maoist" portrayals of East German communism as 'petit-bourgeois socialism' lest he be allowed more creative direction. For more, see Mende 2020.

1973-6 like *Bright Sunny Sky* (1974, dir. Lin Nong) applauded a model of 'socialist production', featuring character tropes like communist cadres who went against antagonists (invariably proponents of capitalist), showcasing the remedial impacts of Maoist thought through formulaic, predictable cinematography[12]. Yet, Xu assesses some films as exemplars of 'affective edification', imparting moral lessons through emotional identification with ideal characters and events, rather than just forcibly imposing explicitly ideological messages. Hence the dissonance when protagonists, unconditionally happy and full of passion, intersected with the coercive logic demanding an absolute, unquestionable love for Mao. As Jiang Qing's infamous critique of the film went, "the class struggle seems to have been pasted on", and she demanded five reshoots of the film[13]. In other cases, more subversive messages could go unnoticed by the Communist Party, as the widely popular character Qiang Guang in Pine Ridge (1974, dir. Liu Guoquan) exemplified. The glib village figure, repeatedly failing to see the error of collecting some pinecones to sell for living expenses, was as much an act of resistance as it was an unwitting foreshadow of Deng's later economic liberalisation[14]. As Xu notes, "one tends to find *jouissance* in the negative"[15]. The circumstances of cinematic production, the attitudes of filmmakers, and the 'message' of their film have a complex relationship even when clear institutional links to particular themes exist. My focus thus far on socialist regimes, however, should not be taken to mean that these dynamics existed only within nation-building, 'ideological', authoritarian contexts, but reflect the contradictions within cinematic works often assumed to exemplify crudely propagandistic messaging[16].

The political 'messages' of cinema lie not just with the filmmaker and their works, but with their interpretation, criticism, and re-use – in essence, the 'afterlife' of films. *The Battle for Algiers* (1967, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo) is a landmark in filmic representations of warfare, illustrating how a thick cinematic 'fog of discourse' bringing together emotive, rhetorical and visceral representations can convey more than the 'rational deliberation' of more theoretical, academic

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[12] This specific film can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLlT3shtEWI

[13] Quoted in Xu 2013: 272

[14] One of his famous lines, known even to older generations of Chinese today, is: "If you want to catch a criminal act, then I'll have nothing to do with it; but for capitalism, who doesn't have a little bit in himself?" (trans. Xu 2013)

[15] Xu 2013: 279

[16] Many have been critical of the American military's readiness to support filmmakers, with others consciously rejecting such assistance to maintain directorial independence.

moral and legal debates[17]. The film is a snapshot of conflict of the Algerian war for independence, focusing on a cycle of torture, attacks on civilians, and brutal reprisals conducted by both Algerian guerrillas of the National Liberation Front/FLN and the French 10th Paratrooper Division. Pontecorvo's treatment of political violence is nuanced but clear: violence is a legitimate means of communication and representation, as much an 'expression of the utopian' as of the 'brutally pragmatic'[18]. A self-described 'professional revolutionary'[19], Pontecorvo's film both illustrates Franz Fanon's well-known vision that "decolonization is always a violent of violent phenomenon"[20], but blurs the Manichean, bifurcated colonial world divided cleanly between European and Algerian spaces. It comments on 'rationality' itself: Col. Mathieu, leader of the French soldiers, is neither sadistic caricature nor embodiment of evil, but the logical conclusion of Western civilization itself. "All necessary" actions are warranted to overcome the "emergency", and as he blithely rebuts journalists: "We are soldiers. Our duty is to win. [. . .] Is France to remain in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, you must accept all the necessary consequences". Pontecorvo thus makes clear that the violence depicted is no momentary lapse from governance nor individual fault, but intrinsic to colonialism itself. Overall it is sympathetic in portraying the Algerians, but its scenes of brutality against innocents and the cruel torture employed by the French acquire their power from the verisimilitude of their depictions. As a 1970 review of the film in French magazine *Figaro* exalted: "Nothing ... looks acted or reconstituted. It not only takes the form of a document but has a document's impalpable materiality."[21] This was achieved in part through casting large numbers of war veterans (the film's co-producer Saadi Yacef was a FLN leader on-screen as well as in real life), but the strength of the film also lies musical and aural elements that structure the film and mourn the battle's various victims: distinctly *cinematic* techniques of conveying its message. Equally fascinating, however, are the various responses and repurposing of the film. As Caille notes, few French reviews now and them pass independent judgment on the film. Rather, it has acquired the status of a 'social fact' within French cinematic history, akin to a litmus test for how one perceives filmic value – if political messaging is relevant or desirable to a film's quality

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[17] Charles Jones, 'Did Pontecorvo Show It All?' (unpublished). Quoted in O'Leary and Srirastava 2009: 251
[18] O'Leary and Srirastava 2009: 249
[19] Ibid: 252
[20] Fanon 2004: 1
[21] Caille 2007: 381. Figaro, as well as other publications like Cahiers du Cinéma, are as part of 'French cinema' as theatres themselves.

(as many during its 1967 released denied, but affirmed after 1970)[22]. Others sought to apply the film's subject matter to their own political contexts, despite Yacef's criticism of treating the film as a 'kind of manual', as seen in Francee Covington's 1970 essay "Are The Revolutionary Techniques Employed in The Battle of Algiers Applicable to Harlem?", or in the screenings by the Black Panthers and IRA, as well as preparing cadets in Buenos Aires in the 1970s for a new civilian 'enemy', or Israeli and British troops for urban warfare. Most infamous, however, was its screening by American security officials in 2003, revealing how many defence experts took away the "problematic but alluring efficacy" of brutal and repressive counter-insurgency tactics[23]. One easily succumbs to the 'myth of professional torture' if the film is understood as a complete picture of the battle, despite how it belies the effectiveness of non-violent tactics like recruiting informers (as the French did with FLN defectors) in defeating the FLN in 1957. I set aside questions of the historical 'accuracy' of the film, or Pontecorvo's ideological convictions. Rather, the nature of the film's incomplete political and military messages stem in part from its epic, even mythical aspects. Michael Atkinson asks: "Is it tragic irony, or merely the evolutionary nature of realpolitik, that such a passionate, righteous revolutionary document is now most famous as an ostensible training film for neocon strategists?"[24] This question becomes less perplexing when we consider the interpretive openness of film, the various connotations of its images, and how political processes of dominance and resistance can appropriate and reshape any artistic work.

It is this democratic, dialectical construction of meaning that make clear the potential of cinema as a medium to communicate political meaning[25]. Cinematic works that lack revolutionary credentials, institutional connections, or simply refrain from including politics in their subject matter are not *a*political as such, and one fears that classifying them as 'political' overstretching the idea of the political itself. However, this is hardly a conceptual bind: rather, we are fully comfortable with understanding cinema as containing political and non-political messages and

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[22] Caille 2007
[23] Riegler 2009: 55
[24] Quoted in Riegler 2009: 55. Even today the film's pedagogical value is often uncritically touted for use in counterterrorism: see Miller's (2019) assessment of the film. "Despite its age, it is highly effective at identifying several aspects of modern terrorism and counterterrorism, including but not limited to: the role of women and children in terrorist groups, the use of torture as a means to gain information, the structure of terrorist groups, and the difference between counterterrorism and state terror."
[25] Moller 2016

significance upon embracing plural, eclectic approaches. Focusing on the aesthetic merits, methods and composition of films need not detract or obscure the political undertones and gravitas of individual works; conversely, genres like horror, comedy, or even children's animated films need not be relegated into the realm of the apolitical, even depoliticized work, with nothing to say. For these films also expand our understanding of the 'political' itself. As historians, writers and film critics and long understood, what is 'everyday', 'ordinary', and the (new) 'normal' often remains heavily contested, for the building blocks of politics are commonplace values and beliefs. What becomes clear, however, from my broad survey of the various political commitments of cinema across time and space is the complex, often contradictory relationship between filmmaker, film, context, and message. Meaning arises not just out of directorial intentionality, but audience (mis)understanding, the conditions of their viewings, even the passage of time. Dafa-futurist films seem dated, even part of a 'dead ideology'[26], while films from the Chinese Cultural Revolution surely appear as part of a bygone, unmissed era. Other films are both historically and politically noteworthy – that I discovered *The Battle for Algiers* on a history reading list is a testament to its remarkable staying power. I conclude with some wistfulness, even a yearning for, lost moments relevant in grasping the powerful political messages of films. Thus far I have discussed the thematic, aural, visual, even institutional, significance of film, but any academic essay inherently faces limitations in capturing the intensely emotive dimensions to films and their receptions. I first watched Pontecorvo's masterpiece on a quiet Wednesday afternoon in my room in college, the day before I started writing the history essay in question. Even with the matter-of-fact description provided by the BFI's online player, even on a tiny laptop screen, tinny audio imperfectly reproducing the swelling of voices, gunshots, screams – it was a film immensely moving in its monochromatic depiction of a historical conflict from decades past, of a country I had never stepped foot in. Now imagine stepping back in time, to a crowded theatre in Algiers in 1967, to hear the audience cheer at seeing Arabs cast onscreen at long last, enraged at scenes of torture, pensive in the film's closing moments. Or a French audience upon seeing its initial release in 1970, attending in spite of extreme-right threats – perhaps some were war veterans themselves. Now

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[26] Nonetheless, Mende cautions that such an analytical approach to East German films artificially periodizes them, and contributes to the cultural 'forgetting' of a rich corpus of cinema containing many antecedents of contemporary films.

pluck any one of them out of the theatre, and ask: did that film have a message? In many ways the answer would have been certain.

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