Ladies and Gentlemen ... US Presidents and political messages in Hollywood-Movies

Thomas Goll

The modern societies are more and more visually oriented. The new media rooms are ruled by a new immediacy of communication. Tel talk ist about the return of orality and a new imagery of communication. Both reminds peculiar of the culture of the Middle Ages, which were strongly characterized by the oral traditions and Worlds of images, because the majority of the people were illiterate (Dörner 1997: 248). If this analysis of the return of images is correct, then the social sciences have to deal more with pictures and their importance. This is even more so because they have experiences with effects of images, for example in the history of political propaganda. Not only movies from Leni Riefenstahl demonstrate that propaganda pictures are a powerful weapon.

But the whole thing has to be put in a bigger context. Political propaganda is only a specific case of immediate exertion of influence. Some other movies, which aren't propaganda but pure entertainment, have an effect all over the world. The „Terminator" is known everywhere as well as „Rambo", Julia Roberts and Brad Pitt. These four names show that the global market is dominated by Hollywood-productions, and therefore by the presentation of the "American way of life" or a "western world lifestyle". You can talk about a kind of cultural hegemony which can be criticized (Schweizerhof 2005). So these movies seem to be more than entertainment.

Movies as expression of political culture

The effectiveness of pictorial worlds plays a big role in transferring political culture. Therefore since many years analysis of providers of pictorial policy transfer is seen as a good way to perception.   An established instrument is studying the movies, because they are a mirror of the culture in which they're made. Especially interesting in this context seem to be not only documentation- and propaganda-movies, which are meant to have political impact, but movies that address a general public. You can say they transport political substance often subcutaneously. In other words: if we are what we eat, we may also say, we are what we see or what we pay to see. So called blockbusters can give information about political messages a general public is confronted with. This is true all the more if in these movies political topics are clearly integrated. Because of this especially movies about US Presidents are very interesting for researching processes of political socialisation, imagination and knowledge building.

Political Culture as a semiotic institution

This perception is taken from cultural studies. Research is about the dominant concepts on the world of politics in societies and the transfer of these concepts into societies. The points of interest are about ways to think and perceive as well as normative and emotional dispositions: How is the political sphere shown, which (collective, individual or corporate) players act in this imaginative sphere and what is expected to be normal concerning process and result of politics? In the centre is the opinion that imaginations have the same effect on political reality like for example economic facts do (Dörner 1997: 248-249).

In this semiotic interpretation movies are the expression of textual dispositions. They are adopted through political socialisation. Politics gets allegorical in iconic systems which are tangibly available and are themselves institutions for socialisation. Movies are involved in the construction of political and cultural normality in more than one level of symbolisation – visual, oral, acoustical, musical. And thus people adopt the "reality" of massmedia as their own reality. Movies define – often ex-negativo – among other institutions what „one" can do or say in public, they define what is political correct and separate it from illegitimate ways to say or do something that gets sanctioned in consequence. Movies contain whole ontologies what makes them especially effective. They show in example how politics work and who can make achievements. Movies present what can be expected, what is possible and what is wanted. They orchestrate values and norms but most of all meaningful myths to give orientation in a day life getting more and more hard to understand (Dörner 1997: 249). Another reason for the capability to reach an effect through movies is that they are not regarded as a part of political education or propaganda by the recipient. So in contrast the orchestrated constructions are taken unconsciously as part of entertainment culture and are adopted as an element of normal communication. So the movies work with seduction not instruction.

The corpus of movies

Basically four dimensions of movies can be analyzed: the text of the movie, the production with its economical and political framework, the reception and effect, summarizing the whole surrounding of movies including their cultural meaning, producers, distributors, public and reviewers. Everything is interesting and relevant. It is never a judgement of aesthetic aspects but judgement of the movie as a part and expression of political culture, as an object from which analysis and interpretation concerning culture or parts of culture can be done.

In doing so the following criteria for choosing movies for political culture research shall be used (Dörner 1997: 250):

1.: quantitative relevance (number of viewers).

2.: public resonance (reviews, statements, symposia).

3.: the typical (not the outstanding other).

4.: the theme (for example NS-movies, Vietnam-movies, Presidential-movies, the picture of the political Washington, the role of foreigners, and so on).

5.: Genre (political thriller, western, comedy, and so on).

Analysis in the sense of political culture research starts with the choice of a theme. This is because of the fact that movies make something an object of discussion in a positive way or do exactly the opposite and create taboos (for example Rambo as a "coming-home"-movie in the post Vietnam-era). Furthermore especially the presented ways to interpret the political reality are important. Here you can distinguish among others the following relevant dimensions (Dörner 1997: 251-254):

1.: roles of acting and behavior (for example the „Outlaw" in a Western).

2.: lines of conflicts and group building: decisive is how these are presented (as strong or alterable, as positive or negative, as real or simply imagination of a few misguided actors).

3.: problem constellations and models of solution (for example violent or discursive, "Nibelungentreue" or civil disobedience, extinction – coexistence – cooperation – social integration).

4.: Values and norms (implicit and explicit moral).

5.: Symbols and myths (for example settings, books).

6.: Concepts of politics and ideologies (for example politics as state action, political teleology).

7.: political style and style of staging (for example pathos).

US Presidents in Hollywood movies

In the last 20 years alone far more than 40 fictional movies were published that concern themselves with the US President. From the beginning of the 20th century until now you can even count 407 commercial movies of that kind (Bolam/Bolam 2007). Thereby you find different prominent figures: Lincoln appears in 123 of them and is thus the President who is in the most movies. Three Presidents—John Tyler, James Buchanan, and Warren Harding— do not appear as characters in movies at all. Ranging from respectful, biographical presentations to comic caricatures, the ways in which Presidents are represented in films tells much about contemporary perception of the office. Some of the movies from the last years were notably successful and caused enormous discussions. That is why they are interesting for political culture research.

It is possible to develop a typology and draft a history (Distelmeyer 2005). I'd like to introduce the following typology while the discussion of it is one possible topic for the workgroup:

A typology of Presidents in the Hollywood movies of the last 20 years

1. Fairytale figures

DAVE (dt.: Dave) (Ivan Reitman) (1993) (Comedy)

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT (dt.: Hallo, Mr. President)(Rob Reiner) (1995) (Comedy)

AMERICAN PRINCESS (dt.: Chasing Liberty) (Andy Cadiff) (2004) (Comedy)

FIRST DAUGHTER (dt.: Ein Date mit Hindernissen) (Forrest Whitaker) (2005) (Comedy)

HEAD OF STATE (dt.: Das Weiße Haus sieht schwarz) (Chris Rock) (2003) (Comedy)

2. The Models – Protectors and Heroes

INDEPENDENCE DAY (dt.: Independence Day) (Roland Emmerich) (1996) (Science Fiction)

AIR FORCE ONE (dt.: Air Force One) (Wolfgang Petersen) (1997) (Action)

THIRTEEN DAYS (dt.: Thirteen Days) (Roger Donaldson) (2000) (Drama)

PEARL HARBOR (dt.: Pearl Harbor) (Michael Bay) (2001) (Drama)

3. The Anti-Models – Liars, Hypocrites, Intriguers and Criminals in power

MARS ATTACKS (dt.: Mars Attacks) (Tim Burton) (1996) (Comedy)

MURDER AT 1600 (dt.: Mord im Weißen Haus) (Dwight Little) (1997) (Thriller)

ABSOLUTE POWER (dt.: Thriller Absolute Power) (Clint Eastwood) (1997) (Thriller)

WAG THE DOG (dt.: Wag the Dog - Wenn der Schwanz mit dem Hund wedelt) (Barry Levinson) (1997) (Satire)

THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (dt.: Der Manchurian Kandidat) (Jonathan Demme) (2004); Remake von: THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (dt.: Botschafter der Angst) (John Frankenheimer) (1962)

4. The Victim – the conspiracy of the almighty system

JFK (dt.: John F. Kennedy - Tatort Dallas) (Oliver Stones) (1991)

5. Something in between

NIXON (dt.: Nixon) (Oliver Stone) (1995)

Deduction – Tendencies in Presidential movies:

1.: Many movies show, after Watergate, politics as a dirty business, which damaged everyone who reached the top or damages those who try to do so. This includes movies that deal with electoral practices and politics, such as:

THE BEST MAN (dt.: Der Kandidat) (Franklin J. Schaffner) (1963); vgl. auch: THE CANDIDATE (dt.: Bill McKay - der Kandidat) (Michael Ritchie) (1973)

PRIMARY COLORS (dt. Mit aller Macht) (Mike Nichols) (1998)

BULWORTH (dt. Bulworth) (Warren Beatty) (1998) (Satire)

THE CONTENDER (dt. Rufmord - Jenseits der Moral) (Rod Lurie) (2000)(Satire)

The original respect for the office and the person of the President is corrupted since Watergate, Iran-Contra-Affair, Monica Lewinsky ... Everything is possible now, the President became an object of satire (Mars Attacks) or is even shown as a criminal (Absolute Power). In addition to the personal deficits of individual characters the power of the political machine has an important role (Nixon).

2.: Presidents as fairytale figures. Examples for this are Dave as well as the heroes of Independence Day and Air Force One. They show how a President could or should be: honest, gripping, brave. But even in Pearl Harbor FDR and JFK in Thirteen Days belong to this context. JFK, however, gets entirely a myth in his battle against the powerful system that he - as Oliver Stone tells us - falls victim to. However, this is material for memories or stories. It is significant that some of the most important movies of this category don't have American directors but Germans who work and live in the US. Yet the question here is: why is it not possible to imagine such scenes – like the President's speech in Independence Day – in German films. This is also an element of political culture – in both countries.

Used and useful literature:

Gabriel A. Almond / Sidney Verba: The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963.

Sarah Miles Bolam / Thomas J. Bolam: The presidents on film : a comprehensive filmography of portrayals from George Washington to George W. Bush. Jefferson, N.C : McFarland & Co., 2007.

Michel Chandelier: Le président des États-Unis vu par Hollywood: 1991-2000. Paris, France: L'Harmattan, 2006.

Jan Distelmeyer: Landesväter und Staatskörper: Präsidenten-Bilder aus Hollywood. In: ApuZ 44/2005, pp. 24-31.

Andreas Dörner/Ludgera Vogt: Die Präsenz des Politischen. Politische Bildwelten in neueren amerikanischen Filmen. In: Wilhelm Hofmann (Hg.): Sinnwelt Film. Beiträge zur interdisziplinären Filmanalyse. Baden-Baden: Nomos 1996, pp. 123-158.

Andreas Dörner: Politische Bildwelten: Filmanalyse als Instrument der Politischen Kulturforschung. In: SOWI 4/1997, pp. 248-254.

Werner Faulstich: Die Filminterpretation. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht 1988.

Phillip L. Gianos: Politics and Politicians in American Film. Praeger Paperback 1999.

Ernest Giglio: Here's Looking at You. Hollywood, Film & Politics. Second Edition. New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Wien: Lang, 2005.

Douglas Kellner: Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern. London, New York: Routledge 1995.

John W. Matviko (Ed.): The American President in Popular Culture. Greenwood Press 2005.

Karl Rohe: Politische Kultur und der kulturelle Aspekt von politischer Wirklichkeit — konzeptionelle und typologische Überlegungen zu Gegenstand und Fragestellung der Politischen Kultur-Forschung. In: Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Jakob Schissler (Hg.): Politische Kultur in Deutschland. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 1987, pp. 39-48.

Peter C. Rollins (Ed.) /John E. O'Connor (Ed.): Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History.University Press of Kentucky 2003.

Michael Ryan/Douglas Kellner: Camera Politica. The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1988.

Mark Sachleben /Kevan M. Yenerall: Seeing the Bigger Picture. Understanding Politics Through Film and Television (= Politics, Media, and Popular Culture Bd. 9). New York, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Wien: Lang, 2004.

Barbara Schweizerhof: Die mächtige Waffe namens Zelluloid. Kunst mit Massenwirkung: Zum Verhältnis von Film und Politik. In: Das Parlament, 17.10.2005, p. 1. (online: http://www.das-parlament.de/2005/42/Titelseite/002.html)

Will Wright: Six Guns and Society. A Structural Study of the Western. Berkeley u. a.: University of California Press 1975.

Internet:

Film & Education (http://www.filmeducation.org/filmlib/)

Film & History (http://www.uwosh.edu/filmandhistory/resources/index.php)

Serienlexikon (http://www.kabeleins.de/serien_shows/serienlexikon/)

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) (http://german.imdb.com)

Zweitausendeins Filmlexikon (http://www.zweitausendeins.de/filmlexikon)

Prof. Dr. Thomas Goll
TU Dortmund
Fakultät Erziehungswissenschaft und Soziologie
Institut für Soziologie
Emil-Figge-Str.50
44221 Dortmund
thomas.goll@fb12.uni-dortmund.de