Media Manipulation and Movies

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Abstract

The media world cannot escape a kind of the "introspection", showing the ways mass media function, how they influence the audience, and, in so doing, what methods and techniques are used. Therefore, for almost a hundred years, cinema has repeatedly addressed the storylines related to the work of the press, television, radio, film studios (and now also Internet agencies), to the stories of journalist investigations, election campaigns, etc. Meanwhile, the work of the employees of media agencies is often portrayed in a rather negative light, revealing many ulcers associated with media manipulations, information wars, direct forgery, etc.

The article analyzes the ways cinema, to a large extent, presents the media (press, television, Internet) as a source of media manipulation and fraud, and the work of journalists as a technology for deceiving and managing the mood of the mass audience just to please the mighty. Materials of our research are academic books and articles on media manipulation and the topic of media manipulation in movies, films about media manipulation, as well as Internet sites. Methodology is based on theoretical framework on the relationship, interdependence and integrity of the phenomena of reality, the unity of the historical and the logical in cognition, the theory of the dialogue of cultures. The research is based on a content analysis and comparative approaches. The following methods are used: data collection (films, monographs, articles, reports) related to the article's theme, analysis of the films and academic literature, theoretical analysis and synthesis; generalization and classification.

Keywords: media manipulation, disinformation, movie, film, society, media, audience, analysis.

1. Introduction

The media are prone to reflection, showing the ways mass media function, how they influence the audience, and, in so doing, what methods and techniques are used. Therefore, for almost a hundred years, cinema has repeatedly addressed the storylines related to the work of the press, television, radio, film studios (and now also Internet agencies), to the stories of journalist investigations, election campaigns, etc. Meanwhile, the work of the employees of media agencies is often portrayed in a rather negative light, revealing many ulcers associated with media manipulations, information wars, direct forgery, etc. (Ehrlich, 2005; 2006; Good, 2008; Lonsdale, 2016; McNair, 2010; 2011; 2014; Milan, 2010; Saltzman, 2002; Shaffer, 2009; Tambini, 2017; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Van Dijk, 2006).

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2. Materials and methods

Materials of our research are academic books and articles on media manipulation and the topic of media manipulation in movies, films which plots relate to media exploitation (the list of films is presented in the Appendix) and the Internet sites. Methodology is based on theoretical framework on the relationship, interdependence and integrity of the phenomena of reality, the unity of the historical and the logical in cognition, the theory of the dialogue of cultures. The research is based on a content analysis and comparative approaches. The following methods are used: data collection (films, monographs, articles, reports) related to the article's theme, analysis of the films and academic literature, theoretical analysis and synthesis; generalization and classification.

3. Discussion

In recent decades, numerous studies have been published on the film's portrayal of the work of media staff, mainly journalists (Ehrlich, 1997; 2004; 2005; 2006; Good, 1989; 2008; Khalilov, 2007; Lonsdale, 2016; Manvell, 1978; McNair, 2010; 2011; 2014; Milan, 2010; Saltzman, 2002; Shaffer, 2009; Zynda, 1979).

Partially, these were the studies of the heroic film images of journalists as fighters against Evil. Nevertheless, there were researches of the ways films represent media agencies and specific journalists as providers of deliberately false sensational information, with their main task being to manipulate public opinion in favor of the "powerful" (Good, 1989; Ehrlich, 2006; Milan, 2010; Rowe, 1992; Saltzman, 2002).

For example, it has been noted that "Hollywood has given us reporters corrupted by cynicism, ambitions, and drink, careless of others' lives and reputations, and ever reluctant to let the truth stand in the way of a good story" (Good, 1989: 9), and journalists in the movie "are hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, dim-witted social misfits concerned only with twisting the truth into scandal and otherwise devoid of conscience" (Rowe, 1992: 27), "'bad journalist' characters actually have helped shore up the press's preferred self-image, either by seeing through lies and pretense to the truth or by paying the price for not telling the truth"(Ehrlich, 2006: 502), journalists" can lie, cheat, distort, bribe, betray, or violate any ethical code as long as the journalist exposes corruption, solves a murder, catches a thief, or saves an innocent"(Saltzman, 2002: 146).

Thus, "most ethical situations presented in journalism films often focused on negative characteristics, actions or decisions of the journalists. The majority of the journalists depicted are corrupt or unethical in some way, while the protagonist is usually either the only ethical reporter in a sea of unethical ones, or an unethical reporter who rises about the rest to become a heroic and honest journalist. … Three types of ethical situations were most often presented in the films – deception or unethical reporting practices, most often involving relationships with sources, and questionable choices in personal relationships and home life"(Milan, 2010: 53).

4. Results

In one of the previous articles (Levitskaya, Fedorov, 2020), we, based on the analysis of a variety of studies (Bakir, McStay, 2018; Born, 2017; Bradshaw, Howard, 2018; Dentith, 2017; Derakhshan, Wardle, 2017; Farkas, Schou, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2018; Flintham et al., 2018; Gelfert, 2018; Janze, Risius, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Levy, 2017; Marwick, 2018; Nielsen, Graves, 2017; Rushkoff, 2003; Sadiku et al., 2018; Tambini, 2017; Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018; Van Dijk, 2006 and others) distinguished a number of the main manipulative techniques used by modern media.

It should be noted that the mechanisms of such manipulative media techniques have been frequently demonstrated in feature films (*15 Minutes*. USA-Germany, 2001; *1984*. UK, 1984; *State of Play*. USA, 2009; *All the King's Men*. USA-Germany, 2006; *House of Cards*. USA, 2013-2019; *Il Mostro*. Italy, 1977; *The Newsroom*. USA, 2012-2014; *The Front Page*. USA, 1974; *The Last Debate*. USA, 2000; *Natural Born Killers*. USA, 1994; *Network*. USA, 1976; *The Morning Show*. USA, 2019-2020; *Wag the Dog*. USA, 1997; *The Truman Show*. USA, 1998, etc.).

For example, the content analysis has shown that in Luigi Zampa's 1977 film *Il Mostro*, about the work of a daily newspaper and a journalist trying to make a career out of sensational stories about a killer maniac, one can find almost the entire set of our generalized classifier of media manipulation techniques.

Thus, the main character (with the support of the newspaper's management) effectively uses the following media manipulation techniques:

- *preemptive impact*: that is, the fastest (significantly ahead of competitors) news message (in this case, this is another murder committed by a maniac) in the (sensational) manner necessary for the communicator; prompt message about the possible negative consequences of this or that phenomenon (in the film it is the newspaper's forecast of further murders);

- *plain folks, maximum simplicity, rubbing into trust*: deliberately simplifying ideas and working to maintain trusting relationships with a mass audience, its support under the pretext that the most simplified ideas, the communicator's suggestions have a positive meaning, since they are supposedly close to the common people. In *Il Monstro* this is manifested, first of all, in the fact that the newspaper publishes on the front page a "sincere" and "confidential" letter from a journalist to a murderer, allegedly aimed at making him surrender to the hands of justice;

- *multiplication, crushing, chaos*: mosaicism, chaotization, flowing information at high speed, its redundancy, high tempo, which allows, on the one hand, even important (political) events to be embedded in the general machine-gun-speed news presentation, and on the other hand, creates the need for interpretations, explanations, since people need to make sense of the world they live in. Mosaic and chaotic nature of the presentation deprive the audience of a sense of orderliness and predictability of life. In Luigi Zampa's film, the newspaper editorial staff creates a whole series of "machine-gun" news series, daily stirring up the interest of the mass audience in the murders and the alleged plans of the maniac.

- *disabling, blocking critical and rational perception*: disabling, blocking critical and rational perception of the message by appealing to the elementary emotions, to the subconscious in the atmosphere of a show, scandal, accentuation of shocking, traumatic and paranormal phenomena. In *Il Monstro,* the main character, together with the newspaper editorial staff, relying on the natural human instinct of fear, fear of death, does everything so that the audience does not reflect and analyze, but only trusts the editorial policy of interpreting "hot facts" and conjectures.

- *reiteration*: constant, obsessive repetition (including the reception of the initial and secondary information waves) of certain statements, regardless of the truth. This technique is also actively used in the film by the main character in relation to the income-generating "hot topics".

- *exploitation of slogans, myths and stereotypes*: In L. Dzampa's film, it is made clear that journalism is capable not only of exploiting myths and stereotypes, but also of deliberately constructing them.

- *rumor creation and exploitation*: Throughout the story, the authors of *Il Monstro* show in detail how the newspaper purposefully creates, spreads and exploits rumors.

- *Trojan horse*: fragmentation and gradual introduction of necessary information between neutral and/or true information. This manipulative technique is also used by the main characters of the film in newspaper publications about a maniac killer.

- *selection, card stacking, concept change*: selection, cheating, substitution of concepts, biased selection of information, selection and unbalanced emphasis on only positive or only negative facts and arguments, while marginalizing or suppressing the opposite; using assumptions as reasoning; replacing the positive (or negative) qualities of some phenomenon with others (sometimes opposite), which are necessary for the manipulator at the moment. In *Il Monstro* it is clearly shown how newspapers from the whole variety of daily information flow do select the information about murders for the front page.

- *transfer, projection, associated chain*: the transfer of positive (or negative) qualities associated with established positive or negative concepts in society to certain phenomena, organizations, countries necessary for the manipulator at the moment, nations, ideas, personalities, etc. In case of L. Dzampa's film, it is the transfer of the popularity of the journalist and his coverage of murders, to the extended business sectors: the publication of detective books, merchandising including perfumery, toy production, popular songs, TV shows, etc.

- *appeal to authority, to opinion leaders, testimonial*: real and fictitious statements of famous (or notorious) people. In *Il Monstro* this role of a "mediator", "authority", an"expert" is promptly played by the main character - the journalist, since it is to him that the maniac sends letters announcing the next murder prepared by him.

- *name calling, labeling*: negative labeling, demonization. In the film, the maniac is deliberately demonized by the journalists, he is given the features of "Invincible Evil", capable of keeping a big city at bay.

- *promotion and self-promotion*: advertising and self-promotion of an individual, group, party, organization, company, etc. In the film's case it is both self-promotion of a newspaper and the journalist reporting on a series of murders.

- *straightforward lie*: falsification, forgery, fake in media texts. At the end of the film, it turns out that the entire media story of the maniac (although all the murders were really committed) was initially based on forgery and falsification.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, although "every year brings yet more journalists to the screen, sometimes to play the hero, sometimes the villain, and sometimes something of both" (Good, 2008: 5), cinema is largely portraying the media (press, television, Internet) as an agent of manipulation and fraud, and the work of journalists is often shown as a technology of deceiving and managing the mood of the mass audience for the benefit of the certain powerful groups.

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Selected filmography of feature films and TV series on media manipulation
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1984. UK, 1956.
1984. UK, 1984.
99 francs. France, 2007.
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Ace in the Hole. USA, 1951.
All the King's Men. USA, 1949.
All the King's Men. USA, 1958.
All the King's Men. USA-Germany, 2006.
All the King's Men. USSR, 1971.
Breaking News. Hong Kong - China, 2004.
Brexit: The Uncivil War. UK, 2019.
Confessions of a Dangerous Mind. USA-Canada-Germany, 2002.
Fifth Estate. USA, 2013.
Free Rainer. Austria-Germany, 2007.
God Bless America. USA, 2011.
Good Advice. USA, 2001.
Good Night, and Good Luck. UK-USA-France-Japan, 2005.
Hot News. Russia, 2009.
House of Cards. USA, 2013-2019.
Il Mostro. Italy, 1977.
Kill the Messenger. USA, 2014.
La grande lessive. Franc, 1968.
La Mort en direct. France-Germany, 1980.
Lions for Lambs. USA, 2007.
L'odeur des fauves. France-Italy, 1972.
Mad City. USA, 1997.
Mad Men. USA, 2007-2015.
Manipulation. Germany-Switzerland, 2011.
Meet John Doe. USA, 1941.
Morning Glory. USA, 2010.
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. USA, 1939.
Natural Born Killers. USA, 1994.
Network. USA, 1976.
Nightcrawler. USA, 2014.
Nothing Sacred. USA, 1937.
Quiz Show. USA, 1994.

Shattered Glass. USA-Canada, 2003.
State of Play. USA, 2009.
Sweet Smell of Success. USA, 1957.
Thank You for Smoking. USA, 2005.
The Front Page. USA, 1974.
The Last Debate. USA, 2000.
The Morning Show. USA, 2019-2020.
The Newsroom. USA, 2012-2014.
The Paper. USA, 1994.
The Rum Diary. USA, 2011.
The Truman Show. USA, 1998.
Wag the Dog. USA, 1997.
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