POLITAINMENT: REFLECTING ON POLITICAL AFFAIRS VIA AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

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Abstract:

The study discusses the ways in which current political issues and different aspects of political communication are portrayed in audiovisual media products, specifically in motion pictures and episodic television dramas. As noted by the authors, these types of narratives are often available globally, especially in films and TV shows that are produced in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. However, the principles of polit-

ainment, i.e., a politics-entertainment hybrid that turns serious political discourses into entertaining media stimuli, can be identified in post-Communist countries as well; Slovakia being no exception. Therefore, the article also reflects on how Slovak film producers utilise elements of the modern political history of the country to create highly successful film stories. To elaborate the topic, the authors apply standard procedures of logical reasoning – analysis, synthesis, giving examples, comparison and wider generalisation. Certain elements of narrative and discourse analysis are used as well.

Key words: *politainment, media entertainment, political communication, feature film, episodic drama, audiovisual media*

INTRODUCTION

Today, audiovisual media entertainment may be perceived as a pervasive everyday phenomenon. Entertaining content often ignores the once firm boundaries separating the public and private spheres of human life, constituting a whole new area of social communication – the sphere of entertainment. Given the fact that we are interested in how politics merges with entertainment within the media industries and their audiovisual outcomes, it is necessary to acknowledge that entertainment experience is, in a way, universal, but at the same time always highly individualised. Applying a certain portion of simplification, we may differentiate between hedonic, eudaimonic (i.e., emotionally deeper, more complex, thoughtful) and mixed emotions, experienced on the basis of varied entertainment stimuli [Radošinská 2016: 54]. While discussing political communication and its entertaining variants conveyed by the media, we work with the assumption that this kind of public information dissemination is rarely able to appeal to our rational reasoning, which also means that mediated hybrids merging political communication and entertainment are mostly of a hedonic or mixed nature. In the former case, public appearances of political figures are perceived as media shows that are supposed to entertain the audiences (or, more precisely, the potential voters). On the other hand, mixed entertainment experiences, as we presume, result from watching, hearing or reading about political figures and affairs that, for someone, may seem to be pleasantly amusing, while for other individuals they are disgusting, outrageous, absurd or simply morally and ethically unacceptable. It is rather paradoxical that while experiencing disgust or anger resulting from such media product, its topic or the way it is elaborated, some media audience members keep seeking similar entertainment, as these negative emotions are actually what they want to experience – or rather get rid of symbolically [Vorderer & Halfmann 2019: 79–96].

The prominent status of media entertainment within our everyday life is radically transforming the conditions and strategies of media production. Any discussion on how politics interacts with the media industries and their entertaining products therefore has to involve the rather obvious, yet necessary statement that media entertainment follows its own rules and keeps reacting to ever-changing cultural trends,

including the rise of media-driven narcissism [Bučková 2018: 37–49]. It is not too bold to say that we need media entertainment – even its forms involving political realities – to reduce the otherwise unbearable pressure of the postmodern era or rather emerging hypermodern times [Lipovetsky 2013]. On the other hand, in the case of politics-entertainment hybrids, this welcome escapism often walks hand-in-hand with serious and rather undesirable sociocultural phenomena. To name a few of them, we may talk about the cruel and competition-based political climate, the carnivalisation of politics [Pravdová 2014: 861–868], the ruthless personalisation of public affairs, populism and specifically cultural populism [McGuigan 1993: 40–41], the decreased trust in official authorities [Morley 2007: 30], people cynically judging social institutions and exaggerating their professional misconduct [Habermas 2000: 257–268], a crisis of democracy and civil society [McCoy, Rahman & Somer 2018: 16–42], the media-driven discreditation of political institutions [Macháčková & Tkaczyk 2020: 64–83] or the public appearances of politicians that, more than anything else, look like cabaret performances.

As these communication phenomena are nowadays becoming increasingly prominent, it is hardly surprising that audiovisual and digital media culture is oversaturated by resourceful (real and fictitious alike) stories about political corruption, public authorities failing to fulfil their purposes[1] and arrogance expressed by the rich and powerful. The formal attributes of creating and presenting these stories are so convincing that media audiences sometimes perceive them as more "realistic" and certainly more appealing than any objective facts [Radošinská & Višňovský 2013: 26]. It may be presumed that the given disorientation and anxiety of media recipients have only become more intense since March 2020, when the media started to massively disseminate real as well as specious pieces of news on the COVID-19 global pandemic and outline the disease's social, cultural and political consequences.

As noted above, the study's main objective is to reflect on audiovisual politainment, i.e., to discuss the ways in which political issues and public figures are portrayed in audiovisual media products, specifically in motion pictures and episodic television dramas, predominantly for entertainment purposes. We mostly focus on the products of globalised (U.S.-based) television and film production, but the Slovak media environment is mentioned as well; recently, multiple audiovisual works of this kind have been produced, offering stylised portrayals of Slovakia's modern political history and its key events and personalities. Even though the term "audiovisual media" commonly refers to a wide spectrum of media products and related institutions or even technologies, for the purposes of this study, the expression is used specifically in relation to films and episodic television dramas (media products which are fully fictional or based on real events).

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[1] As noted by Sámelová [2019: 4–15], the Western population imprisons itself in the national-identity (or ethnocentric) media "bubbles" and feels misunderstood by its own state authorities, which often see their people as socially ignorant, illiterate, uneducated and dependent.

1. POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA: PARALLELS AND CONTRASTS

The ways political topics are portrayed in the media are predominantly discussed by authors who base their views on the paradigmatic outlines of critical political economy of media. For example, McChesney [2014: 14] claims that the contemporary issues concerning critical political economy of media include the nature of today's journalism and its relationship to the processes of democratisation; the need to better understand government, commercial and corporate propaganda; the commercialisation of the media and the simultaneous depoliticisation of society; the connections between media commercialisation and militarism; the trends in producing commercial culture; the emergence of "alternative" media institutions or systems and the interconnections between the media, society, politics, and technologies. As audiovisual portrayals of political events or figures engaging in political life are related to several of the above-mentioned problems, we apply the outlines of critical political economy of the media in order to discuss the political and ideological aspects of globalised movie and television production, partly following up on our previous work [Radošinská, Kvetanová & Višňovský 2020: 4–21].

Even a brief look at the political and ideological frameworks of episodic television dramas and films distributed to the global media audiences leaves no doubt that these kinds of audiovisual media production are ideologically based on the imperatives of late capitalism. However, the relationships between internationally distributed audiovisual narratives and society-wide discourses (such as political affairs) are very complex and hard to prove unambiguously. Much has been said about Hollywood and its tendency to reproduce political ideas referring to the progressive left and liberalism. However, most Hollywood celebrities, for understandable reasons, do not openly declare their political views and if so, the vast majority of them support the Democratic Party.[2] Certainly, the political and civil engagement of Hollywood actresses and actors is nothing new. We may mention Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland participating in a public campaign against the Vietnam War, Sidney Poitier and Sammy Davis Jr. supporting civil rights movements and anti-racist advocacy, or Shirley MacLaine and Warren Beatty engaging in George McGovern's unsuccessful presidential campaign in 1972 [Wheeler 2006: 139–140].

Following the same line of thought, Booker [2007: 189] states that all kinds of postmodern media content and most art forms tend to reproduce and promote the ideology of post-capitalism. On the other hand, there are film directors who are unusually inventive and bold enough to naturally portray the cynical, ahistorical and emotionally distorted worldview of late capitalism. However, this does not change the fact that their audiovisual works are capable of achieving international popularity precisely

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[2] It needs to be remarked that the Hollywood actors and directors Sylvester Stallone, Chuck Norris and Clint Eastwood openly articulated their support of the militaristic activities and aggressive foreign policies of the then-ruling Republican Party after the attack on the World Trade Centre on 11th September 2001, commonly referred to as the events of 9/11 [Wheeler 2006: 146–154].

on basis of the economic and ideological processes they criticise so harshly. The often-discussed thesis of Hollywood's cultural imperialism (and of its principles being used by other types of globalised cultural products) tends to point to the processes of creating and establishing universal cultural tastes that allow the producers to accumulate profits on a global scale. Nevertheless, Croteau & Hoynes [2014: 346–347], referring to Barnet and Cavanagh, claim that globalised media production mainly aspires to form lifestyle aspects and taste patterns, leading to, more than anything else, the establishment of a widely shared portfolio of easily accessible products and favoured experience. In other words, even when presenting political topics, internationally distributed audiovisual media production seems to be strangely "apolitical", which means that it often criticises real political affairs (or refers to them through various allegories) not to inspire a change in the status quo, but rather to publicly ridicule politics and politicians, because it is fashionable and thus it is also what their target audiences expect to see.

The given topic is also addressed by Artz [2015: 195–199]. According to the author, globally successful film narratives tend to convincingly simulate their solidarity towards a wide spectrum of social and political conflicts (for example, they depict common problems shared by the majority consisting of blue-collar workers, or appeal to the need to address ethnical, gender and race disparities). Quite understandably, most of these movies cannot convey a complex reflection on the aforementioned social problems. When they achieve commercial success, their popularity only underlines the legitimacy of the thesis that cultural hegemony fulfils its true purpose only in the case it is able to flawlessly pretend to have an interest in common people and their problems. This allows the audience members to identify themselves with fictitious protagonists, who easily overcome life crises these viewers have to face as well, although just on the silver screen (or on television). In the meantime, society-wide problems resulting from misrecognition are only becoming more and more serious [Solík 2014: 203–216].

American mainstream cinema often presents itself (of course, only symbolically and with questionable consequences) as a "guardian" of individual freedoms, human rights and democracy. The same may be said about today's episodic dramas which increasingly compete against feature films and documentaries to attract similar audience segments. Episodic television dramas, and not only those focusing on politically engaged entertainment, tend to use all the tropes and stylish visuals that show business has to offer in order to ambitiously comment on contemporary social and political affairs, effectively marginalising documentary production. For example, Michael Moore, the American documentarist and civil activist, was once able to attract wider audiences to his documentary films such as Bowling for Columbine (2002) and Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004). The former documentary reflects on the absurdly wide availability of firearms in the United States and cases of mass shootings at schools, while the latter movie is largely focused on political issues, commenting on the glob-

al social and political consequences of controversial decisions taken by George W. Bush's administration after the events of 9/11. However, Moore's recent projects have failed to achieve the same amount of international response. Capitalism: A Love Story (2009, about problematic social frameworks established by late capitalism) and the cleverly named documentary Fahrenheit 11/9 (2018, analysing the global political turmoil caused by the communication habits and actions of former American President Donald Trump, who was officially announced as President-elect on 9th November 2016) are both as thoroughly elaborated and thematically interesting as Bowling for Columbine or Fahrenheit 9/11, but much less known and not as successful. On the other hand, the era of Internet-distributed television (in the U.S. called the era of "over-the-top" TV) has offered documentarists reflecting on contemporary political affairs a number of new opportunities [Radošinská, Kvetanová & Rusňáková 2020: 59–60]. Documentary films are prominent especially on Netflix – for example, the acclaimed docudrama The Social Dilemma (2020, directed by Jeff Orlowski) has earned a lot of praise and attention. Besides warning about other problematic aspects of online social networking, the movie also explains how surveillance capitalism[3] works and how conspiracy theories shared online disrupt serious political communication.

The leftist movie director Oliver Stone is another well-known filmmaker specialising in politically engaged audiovisual production. As remarked by Bergan [2008: 369], Stone's hostile attitude towards American foreign policy, especially militarism, is obvious in the case of his war dramas such as Platoon (1986) and Born on the Fourth of July (1989). The director's other successful projects include Wall Street (1987, a satiric portrayal of the American financial services industry) and his highly controversial drama JFK (1991), in which he openly claims that the late American President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's public assassination was organised by prominent industrial and military tycoons. Just like Michael Moore, Oliver Stone has not been able to repeat his earlier remarkable accomplishments; his thriller World Trade Centre (2006) and biopic Snowden (2016, about the globally known whistle-blower uncovering alleged illegal electronic surveillance practices imposed on common citizens) are less popular than his previous works. However, Stone has embraced the changes in the media industry; the filmmaker's leftist and openly propagandistic exploration of the modern history of American politics titled The Untold History of the United States (2012) is available via the online television platform Netflix [Radošinská, Kvetanová & Rusňáková 2020: 60–61].

As the previous discussion suggests, political topics and current (or recent) political affairs entangled within audiovisual entertainment have been present in globally available media production for decades. After all, media fulfil an important role in terms of establishing foreign policies and related decision-making processes [Tököly-

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[3] The topic is also addressed by sociologists, social philosophers and other scholars specialising in social sciences and humanities. This line of thinking is represented by, for example, Bauman and Lyon [2013].

ová & Modrzejewski 2013: 37–47]. Moreover, the social, cultural and political frameworks of the new millennium allow this type of media production to spread further than ever before, mostly thanks to digital media. As it seems, the *portmanteau* term "politainment", which is addressed in the next chapters of the study, may not refer to a whole new strategy of audiovisual media production, but it certainly underlines the fact that in many cases we are no longer able to distinguish between real events (or their selected fragments) and sensation-driven stories that portray them, stirring our emotions.

2. ON THE CONCEPT OF POLITAINMENT

The concept of "politainment" is, just like other *portmanteau* words[4] merging the term "entertainment" with various expressions that refer to current cultural trends, a logical result of the aforementioned problems we experience while trying to distinguish between what is serious and what is plainly amusing. We need to acknowledge that politainment is, at least in terms of scholarly reflections, discussed less frequently than, for instance, infotainment or edutainment. Infotainment, the information-entertainment hybrid, is probably addressed most often [Edgerly & Vraga 2017: 807–826]. It is no surprise as today's media audiences expect news coverage that is processed in an entertaining manner, especially in the case of television news [Višňovský et al. 2019: 40–60] and social media journalism [Švecová & Kačincová Predmerská 2020: 120–130]. The term "democratainment", coined and widely popularised by Hartley, is mentioned regularly as well. As the author suggests, the era of democratainment allows television and other mass media to seize control over most educational fields; democratainment is thus another hybrid merging official (government) authorities, educational systems and media communication [Hartley 2004: 524–530]. Almost the same can be said about politainment. Media entertainment possesses a remarkable ability to overcome any remaining boundaries separating it from other spheres of media production and social discourse as a whole. After all, that is why political communication is changing so immensely, becoming highly personal and competitive. "Politainment refers to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication. (…) The term represents the entangling of political actors, topics, and processes with the entertainment culture." Politainment also refers to an increasing mediatisation and professionalisation of politics that is typical for modern democracies [Nieland 2015: 456–457]. Holly sees politainment as a logical consequence of the fact that "media increasingly communicate in terms of entertainment, including in areas which were hitherto reserved for information". This tendency is obviously associated with media producers' increased orientation towards commercial

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[4] *Portmanteau* is originally a French expression that blends parts, phonetic aspects and meanings of two seemingly unrelated words. The linguistic principle of blending is currently very popular in the contexts of media entertainment and journalistic communication. Its purpose is to diversify already existing expressions or to make them "catchier". In our case the portmanteau expression "politainment" reacts to media entertainment and its pervasiveness, i.e., its ability to influence new forms of once serious communication situations related to politics [Bosshart & Hellmueller 2009: 3–19].

goals. However, in case of politainment, the commercial orientation of the media is confronted and strengthened by "convergent interests on the part of political actors" [Holly 2008: 328]. In other words, politainment is driven by multiple actors – the media themselves, their owners, politicians who are in power and would like to remain so, and also political figures who successfully use their communication skills and populistic gestures to gain more public attention.

One of the most thorough elaborations of the term "politainment" can be found in the publication authored by Dörner. According to the author, politainment is a certain form of public, media-disseminated communication which manifests itself in relation to political topics, figures, processes, interpretative formulas, identities and meanings, positioning (media) entertainment as a new political reality. This new reality constitutes an experiential framework, through which politics is accessed by the general public [Dörner 2001: 31]. Nieland remarks that Dörner's basic taxonomy of politainment distinguishes between two different types of this politics-entertainment hybrid – entertaining politics and political entertainment. Firstly, we have to acknowledge the existence (and successfulness) of entertaining politics, which allows "political actors to get media access in order to enhance their public images and to promote political issues" (for example, party conventions accompanying election campaigns or other important political affairs may be staged by movie directors or other media professionals, mimicking the dramaturgy of media events attended by celebrities such as pop concerts). While presenting themselves in an amusing or celebrity-like manner, politicians often expose their personal characteristics and private lives, mostly in order to appeal to potential voters who are, in fact, mostly uninterested in politics [Nieland 2015: 456]. "Thus, entertaining politics serves to acquire and stabilise political power" [Dörner 2001: 31-32].

In Slovakia, this concept is discussed only occasionally [Radošinská 2016: 92], in Czechia as well [Hvížďala 2005]. A similar thematic focus can also be found in Polish scholarly literature [Dobek-Ostrowska 2019]. The most important elaborations of the topic in question include the already mentioned German-written publication by Dörner [2001] and also the works of Haas [2005] and Wagner [2005]. Other important contributions to this discussion were published in English, for instance the texts written by Carpini and Williams [2001: 160–181] or Van Zoonen [2005].

Most of these publications follow Dörner's line of thought. Krause [2004: 92] notes that Dörner's understanding of politainment thoroughly explains a new type of public, media-disseminated communication, which spreads across new political reality, connecting political topics, actors and processes with emphasis on the aspect of entertainment. Using the perspective established by British cultural studies, Dörner sees politainment in a neutral, pragmatic manner. He underlines the fact that thanks to this politics-entertainment hybrid, political communication becomes more visible and political values can be popularised widely. Politainment thus constitutes specific models of political activities, which offer the public many different opportunities

to interact with the political environment more closely. It may even inspire ordinary people to participate in politics and political processes. This phenomenon is, in its nature, ambiguous and hard to understand.

As noted above, this study aims to focus on the second type of politainment, so-called political entertainment that communicates political topics via popular music, cinema or television and "tends to exploit the world of politics with its sometimes-interesting personalities, prestigious figures, and exciting scandals". Political matters are also taken up by television or film producers as raw material for drama or satire plots [Nieland 2015: 456–457]. This appears to be true in the cases of all media narratives discussed in the following chapter; films and episodic dramas alike.

3. POLITAINMENT IN TODAY'S EPISODIC DRAMAS AND FILMS

The moment the long-running episodic drama West Wing (1999–2006) was introduced publicly can be seen as a crucial breaking point foreshadowing a new era of television politainment. The TV show was first aired at a time when just a few episodic dramas were labelled as "quality TV" and almost no Hollywood actresses and actors were willing to participate in creative projects meant for the small screen. However, West Wing achieved its huge success and international response thanks to the strong on-screen presence of acclaimed acting personalities such as Allison Janney, Martin Sheen and Bradley Whitford. The project's thematic outlines reflect on the everyday lives of the White House staffers, uncovering some of the harsh conditions that are associated with "running" the United States and the country's internal affairs and foreign policies. In a way, the TV show's portrayal of American politics (even though the story itself is purely fictional) tells us a lot about how political communication used to work just before the rise of social media.

Similar thematic aspects are also present in the episodic drama Scandal (2011–2018). The TV show's main character, portrayed by Kerry Washington, is partly inspired by the former George H. W. Bush administration's press secretary Judy Smith. As Smith herself participated in the show's production, we may presume that her insight into the depicted environment contributed to this fictitious episodic narrative's persuasiveness, authenticity and complexity. The story focuses on a female professional who specialises in "fixing" potential scandals, effectively covering missteps taken by the rich and powerful. The producers were aware of an emerging revolution in promoting television content, introducing a thorough communication strategy. The TV show's popularity was largely based on its strong social media presence, as the cast members live-tweeted with their fans while new episodes were being aired. This kind of interaction between the producers and their audiences was quite unique back then, outlining the future possibilities of creating institutionalised online fandoms and obtaining authentic feedback.

A different thematic framework was explored by the episodic dramas Homeland (2011 – 2020) and The Americans (2013–2018). Reacting to the paranoid atmosphere follow-

ing the airborne attack targeting the World Trade Centre in September 2001, Homeland offers an immersive insight into the American secret services and the ways they influence foreign affairs, in this case mostly the political situation in the Middle East. The show's key character, Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), a mentally unstable intelligence agent, establishes an inappropriate intimate relationship with Nicholas Brody (Damian Lewis), a former military officer and family man, who experienced long-term captivity and torture that left him mentally broken. Homeland explores several controversial topics such as one's inability to maintain the boundaries between personal matters and work obligations, religious disparities and explicit aspects of international terrorism. In contrast, the episodic drama The Americans also works with the elements of a conspiracy thriller and a paranoid atmosphere, but it returns to the past to depict the Cold War era. The story emerges around Elizabeth and Philip Jennings (Keri Russell and Matthew Rhys), a couple of Soviet spies pretending to be a "typical" American family with two children. The most interesting thematic element of this fictitious TV show is a convincing portrayal of the Reagan-era Cold War and its key events; some of the characters are clearly inspired by real personalities.

Most of the above-mentioned episodic dramas are centred on strong female characters. Moreover, it can be said that postmillennial television politainment often favours refined portrayals of women in power. Such episodic dramas include Political Animals (2012), Veep (2012–2019) and Madam Secretary (2014–2019).[5] All of them work with the idea of a woman becoming the Vice-President or, eventually, the President of the United States. Thus, we may state that all three narratives were produced well ahead of similar real-life events, two of them probably expecting Hillary Clinton's political ascension. Each of these TV shows, to a certain extent, indirectly refers to Hillary Clinton's personal life and public presence. The drama Political Animals offers a dynamic portrayal of a divorced former First Lady Elaine Barrish (Sigourney Weaver), who now serves as the Secretary of State[6] and intends to run for President. Trying to find a proper balance between her personal affairs and political ambitions, Barrish recruits a surprising ally – a young female journalist (Carla Gugino) who used to criticise her harshly. The motive of a politically powerful woman is also applied in the highly acclaimed political drama Veep. Julia Louis-Dreyfus's skilled and charming Vice-President Selina Meyer soon finds out that her position is less appealing than she expected it to be. The TV show focuses on everyday political conflicts in Washington. In this case, we may say that there is a real-life parallel personalised by Kamala Harris.[7] A fictitious portrayal of a woman actually becoming the American President

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[5] In 2019 titled "Madam President".

[6] In the U.S., there have been three female Secretaries of State so far – Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, George W. Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Barack Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Out of them, only Hillary Clinton is a former First Lady. She lost her 2016 presidential run to Donald Trump. Obviously, she is, unlike Weaver's television character Elaine Barrish, still married to her husband, the ex-President.

[7] Kamala Harris, the newly elected first female Vice-President of the United States, used to serve in the U. S. Congress just as the fictional television heroine Selina Meyer, the main protagonist of Veep.

is present in Madam Secretary. The main storyline, once again, unfolds around a female Secretary of State, in this case called Elizabeth McCord (Téa Leoni). Unlike Elaine Barrish from Political Animals and Selina Meyer from Veep, McCord actually bears a physical resemblance to Hillary Clinton, including short blonde hair and a similar dressing style.

Probably the most discussed episodic drama focused on politainment is Netflix's House of Cards (2013–2018). Kevin Spacey's portrayal of Francis Underwood, a vengeful, passively aggressive and overly ambitious congressman, has been highly praised by critics and has been popular with online television audiences since the TV show's initial introduction. It is less known that House of Cards is, in fact, an Americanised remake of a 1990s British television drama of the same name. However, Spacey's methodical, repulsive, manipulative and utterly antiheroic political figure, for years celebrated by the show's loyal viewers, was eventually removed from the narrative due to the actor's personal scandals that permanently damaged his show business career.[8]

The less known, yet remarkable miniseries Show Me a Hero[9] (2015) does not focus on top politics, but rather looks into the everyday problems of a small-town mayor in the 1980s. The show is based on real events, portraying Nick Wasicsko (Oscar Isaac), a young local politician who became a mayor in Yonkers, New York in 1987. The story depicts the rise and fall of Wasicsko in a rarely convincing manner, addressing some of the most searing social and political problems of the 80's – race disparities in relation to education, housing segregation and political corruption. Ultimately, the mayor becomes a tragic example of being too ambitious and unable to accept defeat.

Recently, another notable television project has been introduced – The Politician (since 2019), a bright and comical episodic drama about a teenager who is fascinated by the idea of establishing a career in politics. He plans to build a part of his future public image on the basis of confusing high school "politics", applying for the position of the Student Council Chairman. This clever satire reaches far beyond common high school comedies and their tropes to offer an engaging depiction of a young man losing his illusions associated with a political career.

Postmillennial Hollywood cinema has embraced politainment as well, albeit a little reluctantly and less thoroughly than television production. One of the most notable film stories of this kind, Frost/Nixon (2008), was directed by Ron Howard. The narrative is centred on the political situation in the U.S. after the Watergate scandal and President Richard Nixon's resignation. The audiences perceive this notoriously known political affair through the eyes of David Frost (Michael Sheen), the then aspiring British talk-show host who interviews Nixon (Frank Langella) on television after

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[8] Kevin Spacey's acting contract was dismissed in 2017, in reaction to the (legitimate) allegations posed by the social campaign #MeToo. Spacey was accused of sexually assaulting or harassing multiple colleagues.

[9] The title is based on the famous quote by Francis Scott Fitzgerald, the prominent American novelist: "Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy" [Ratcliffe 2006: 50].

the former American President's three-year long silence. The most prominent aspect of the movie is the two men's intellectual and value-based struggle in front of the camera. The motion picture communicates the idea that no matter what politicians and media professionals do (or do not do), common people love them only as much as they hate them.[10]

Another collision of the world of politics and journalism is present in the biographical drama The Post (2017), directed by Steven Spielberg. Much like other Spielberg's feature films portraying historical events, whether real (Schindler's List, 1993) or fictional (War Horse, 2011), The Post conveys a clear pacifist message, as the movie's main storyline focuses on an unprecedented conflict between an influential newspaper's staff and American government authorities that is widely known as "the Pentagon Papers". Kay Graham (Meryl Streep), the owner of the daily Washington Post, faces an uneasy decision – whether to back off or stand for the freedom of the press and thus allow Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks), the paper's editor, to pursue a story about how American authorities lied to the general public regarding the Vietnam War, denying its futility, which would endanger the Washington Post and its journalists.

Nowadays, a quite significant creative line within Hollywood cinema focuses on politainment in relation to political figures operating "behind-the-scenes"[11] or well-informed, yet once ordinary citizens turning into whistle-blowers.[12] These movies are, as a general rule, based on real events. Firstly, we may mention the controversial motion picture The Fifth Estate (2013, directed by Bill Condon). Benedict Cumberbatch's engaging portrayal of Julian Assange, the criminally prosecuted, eccentric and misanthropic founder of WikiLeaks, is unique for several reasons. The movie confronts social and political issues that result from the irreversible changes in journalism caused by social media platforms, unclassifiable data streams and individual initiatives of people who are not (and do not intend to become) professional investigative journalists. The media/politics conflict is present at multiple levels. Assange struggles to acknowledge that he is, in fact, a new type of journalist born in the digital era, seeing himself rather as a civil activist. Moreover, the main protagonist has no choice but to share his data with the editorial office of the British newspaper The Guardian, struggling to achieve public credibility. We may say that Assange's case has changed the world of journalism forever – hence the movie's title "The Fifth Estate", which

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[10] A similar message is also present in George Clooney's 2005 movie Good Night and Good Luck, where David Strathairn plays Edward R. Murrow, the famous radio journalist. The film is based on real events and focuses on Murrow's effort to eliminate the political influence of Joseph McCarthy, the Republican Senator known for viciously attacking his political opponents and loathing real or imaginary Communists. Another "media vs. politics" conflict involving an investigative journalist (Russell Crowe) and an influential politician (Ben Affleck), in this case fully fictional, is present in State of Play (2009, directed by Kevin Macdonald). The movie is inspired by an eponymous British episodic drama aired in 2003.

[11] In French also called éminence grise.

[12] Oliver Stone's 2016 biographical drama Snowden has been mentioned above. The movie portrays the controversial personality of the National Security Agency analyst Edward Snowden (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who leaked highly classified materials to the press, warning about progressive surveillance techniques applied across all aspects of people's public and private lives.

claims that the Fourth Estate, or professional journalism, is now challenged by blog-gers, online activists, partisan journalists and social media enthusiasts.

The British drama Brexit: The Uncivil War (2019, directed by Toby Haynes) looks back to 2015, when the political strategist Dominic Cummings started to lead an increasingly popular, but highly unethical campaign meant to convince British vot-ers to leave the European Union. Again, played by the established British movie star Benedict Cumberbatch, the main character is a misanthropist and cynical political marketing professional who always favours the purpose fulfilled over the measures applied. The contemporary British political elites, including politicians who are still active or even in power,[13] are portrayed as sly and calculating people. The film's key message is different, however; the narrative repeatedly underlines the importance of social media platforms in terms of politics and shows what happens when old-school argumentation and intelligent discussion are confronted with the possibilities result-ing from data mining, shameless populism and absurd, yet spectacular agitation (for example, the moment when Cummings comes up with the campaign's main slogan, "Take Back Control", while crouching inside a cleaner's storage room).

Returning to the topics that explore controversies of postmillennial American politics, The Report (2019) is directed by Scott Z. Burns and globally distributed by Amazon Prime Video. Just like Stone's movie Snowden, the film failed to achieve a wider au-dience response despite its shocking focal point.[14] The narrative follows Daniel Jones (the rising Hollywood star Adam Driver), a young and rather idealistic staffer, the actions taken by the Senate Intelligence Committee and the key moments when they investigate whether and how the American intelligence services tortured prisoners in the post-9/11 era, elaborating a shattering "torture" report.

Another post-9/11 political issue is reflected on by the British-American docudrama Official Secrets (2019, directed by Gavin Hood). The storyline is loosely based on the life and work of the whistle-blower Katharine Gun (Keira Knightley), who claimed that Western intelligence services were tasked to influence and potentially even blackmail the United Nations diplomats getting ready to vote on a UN resolution agreeing with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As the case is quite recent and Gun's public engagement is not really over, it is immensely difficult to evaluate the film's credibility and accuracy. As expected, some of the portrayed events are hyperbolised and overly dramatized, but that might have been said about any of the episodic dramas and movies men-tioned above, which are also based on real events.

In Slovakia, audiovisual politainment is mostly conveyed by film documentaries and feature films. We may remark that no such movies were produced in the 2000s and similarly thematised filmmaking became prominent approximately a decade later. It

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[13] In fact, Dominic Cummings, the depicted political strategist, served as a chief adviser to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson until November 2020.

[14] However, we need to point out an important difference between these two films – in the case of The Report, the source documents were made publicly available by official authorities, not leaked by whis-tle-blowers.

is unclear whether this creative shift results from an increasing "public order", or whether the movies mentioned below, in fact, inspired their viewers to follow up more closely on the domestic political situation and Slovak modern political history. As we presume, the truth may lie somewhere in between these seemingly contradictory stances. One way or another, Zuzana Piussi's documentary Od Fica do Fica (2012),[15] which critically reflects on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's era that ended relatively recently, is probably the first audiovisual media product to thoroughly criticise Fico's government, referring to the almost folksy quote of one of the Prime Minister's closest associates: "Win the election, and you can do anything." The same line of documentary work was later elaborated by Tereza Nvotová. However, her documentary with the self-explanatory title Mečiar (2017) delves deeper into the political history of Slovakia as an independent state, returning to the 1990s and the then dominant authoritative governing of one of Fico's predecessors, Vladimír Mečiar. The former Prime Minister is depicted as what he truly was, a once charismatic and convincing politician who later compromised himself in the eyes of the general public due to his attitude to both internal affairs and foreign policies. Another return to this before-the-EU period is present in Barbora Berezňáková's 2019 highly emotionally engaged documentary Skutok sa stal (in English literally The Deed Happened). The film reconstructs some of the most shocking circumstances surrounding the death of Robert Remiáš, a former police and intelligence officer. The obvious prevalence of organised crime in 1990s Slovakia is addressed as well. The author combines a refined investigative approach with original aspects of filmmaking, using many authentic materials, including various media reports.

Even though the above-mentioned documentaries are quite well-known and worthy of scholarly attention, lately it has been obvious that some Slovak filmmakers rather intend to build upon the controversies encircling the real political and social events of the recent past predominantly via feature films. First, we would like to mention Únos, or in English Abduction, (2017, directed by Mariana Čengel Solčanská), which dramatically portrays the series of events related to when, how and why Michal Kováč Jr., the son of the then Slovak President Michal Kováč, was publicly abducted and taken abroad against his will. The same director, this time in cooperation with Rudolf Biermann, later created Slovakia's (probably) most successful movie story based on politainment so far, the feature film Sviňa, in English Scumbag, (2020). This thriller looks back at rising political corruption, politically covered organised crime and clientelism, dramatically reproducing some of the events leading to the illegal tracing and eventual violent death of the young investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. It may be said that this politically-driven crime has changed the Slovak political landscape entirely,[16] which is why the movie has been so

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[15] When translated into English in a literal manner, the movie's title would be "From Fico to Fico". However, a rather looser translation has been used instead – "The Grasp of the State".

[16] Ján Kuciak, a talented investigative journalist and analyst, was murdered by hitmen in 2018 under (yet) not entirely clear circumstances. However, it is quite obvious that Kuciak's violent death is related

successful despite the COVID-19 pandemic which makes it impossible to continue in its theatrical distribution. However, the film is available via Netflix.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The previous chapter of the study suggests that in terms of globally distributed episodic television dramas focusing on politainment, probably the most acclaimed of them used to be House of Cards. However, this was until Kevin Spacey, the irreplaceable "face" of the story, was unveiled as a man praised for his acting abilities, who is also personally despicable, and thus unacceptable in the eyes of the target viewers.

It also seems that American feature films involving politainment tend to draw their inspiration from real events, while episodic television dramas largely favour fictitious narratives. On the other hand, many of them clearly refer to real events that occurred in American or international politics – for example, Téa Leoni's Elizabeth McCord in the episodic drama Madam Secretary may be, in many aspects, seen as an indirect and unacknowledged portrayal of Hillary Clinton.

Some of the discussed media products are thematically oriented towards the administrative and bureaucratic specifics of top politics, using the obvious connections between politically motivated storylines and the general popularity of narratives taking place "in the courtroom" (for example, West Wing or House of Cards).

Reacting to long-term gender disparities in politics and the generally accepted gender stereotype that men are more skilled politicians than women and thus better cope with the burden of leadership, many of the audiovisual works analysed above are centred on remarkable female characters (a mentally unstable and reckless, yet bright-minded intelligence officer in Homeland, a ruthless PR manager and "problem fixer" in Scandal, an ambitious and charismatic Vice-President in Veep, or The Americans' Soviet spy who, along with her "husband", lives in the U.S. as a seemingly harmless suburban family woman). Regarding politainment movies, the most interesting female characters include Meryl Streep's politically engaged owner of the Washington Post in The Post or Keira Knightley's intelligence officer and whistle-blower in Official Secrets.

Undermining the already shattered trust of ordinary people in official authorities and intelligence services even further, some of the movies mentioned above focus on the most controversial situations that have occurred throughout the modern political history of the United States and their ideologically compatible European allies. A brief thematic overview of the individual feature films includes narratives reflecting on internationally discussed political scandals based on true events, often associated with whistle-blowers and their shocking information (Frost/Nixon, The Fifth Estate, Snowden, Official Secrets). The topic of investigative journalism is becoming increas-

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to his journalistic pieces. The massive public protests that followed were called "For Decent Slovakia". A partial reconstruction of Robert Fico's government took place shortly thereafter; Fico was replaced by Peter Pellegrini, one of his closest associates. The protests are addressed in scholarly literature as well [Fichnová, Wojciechowski & Szabo 2019: 76–92].

ingly important as well (The Fifth Estate, The Report). In contrast, Brexit: The Uncivil War is special thanks to its sarcastic way of portraying "behind-the-scenes" actions – data mining, clever propaganda – that led the United Kingdom and its people towards Brexit.

Regarding the Slovak media environment, today's audiovisual politainment is marked by the popularity of documentaries and feature films that "return" to the 1990s, drawing attention to the not-so-flattering reality of the country's political situation. These movies include, for example, the documentaries Mečiar and Skutok sa stal (The Deed Happened), or the feature film Únos (Abduction). Our recent social and political history is addressed by the documentary Od Fica do Fica (The Grasp of the State), and also by the movie Sviňa (Scumbag), which is loosely based on real events. On television, this thematic line of production was briefly represented by the satirical TV show Ministri (in English Ministers, 2018 – 2019), which cynically and absurdly referred to recent political affairs in Slovakia. Depictions of the former (pre-1989) political regime are rather scarce – however, we may mention Ladislav Halama's biographical drama Dubček (2018), which focuses on Alexander Dubček, the late progressive socialist politician who personalised the events of the Prague Spring in 1968.

As we have mentioned above, strengthening political power through public appearances of politicians is anything but new; we may even claim that it has always been so. After all, many absolutist rulers (e.g., Louis XIV in France) and later, even seemingly conventional politicians (for instance, the representatives of the German Weimar Republic) used to stylise their public appearances just like performing artists [Haas 2005: 7]. Moreover, the possible and potentially dangerous collision of one's artistic expressions and political preferences cannot be limited to the world of cinema and television. Today, digital games are marked by this tendency as well [Baltezarević et al. 2019: 28 – 46]. Mistrík, Škripcová and Mičuda [2020: 100] identify the same tendency in relation to theatre, namely Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose fascination with the composer Richard Wagner and pursuit of Romanticism led him towards German monumentalism and, ultimately, celebration of Nazism. However, after WWII, a new, more elegant political style emerged, best represented by John Fitzgerald Kennedy. In turn, the era of social media now sees an unprecedent struggle by politicians to increase their media presence. Many of them have adapted to the unwritten, yet universally established rules of the entertainment industry [Haas 2005: 7].

Politainment (or, alternatively, confrontainment) represents an obvious collision of two formerly distant worlds – politics and entertainment. It is a world filled with multimedia promotion, in which aspiring politicians become media celebrities. As outlined by the expression "confrontainment", mediated appearances of politicians, successful or not, are typically based on sharp, opinionated confrontations and/or personal insults. Public speeches of those holding political power often turn out to be highly expressive, emotional monologues. It is quite common to see politicians enter parliaments or attend public protests dressed in T-shirts with specific slogans,

holding banners or pictures based on Internet memes. Maintaining their social media presence, politicians often share their private photos or purposefully absurd GIF images rather than information on their work obligations or strategic plans. Political affairs and their actors may also be presented as stylised melodramas, almost soap operas or so-called telenovelas [Ponti 2020: 32–45].

This new political communication is practically "born" to inspire political satire, as well as to diversify the otherwise exhausted film tropes and storylines presented in episodic television dramas. Many politically driven quotes and expressions may become a part of folk culture, some of them even constitute the key messages present in audiovisual media entertainment focused on politics, or as we call it, politainment. This approach to publicly presenting politics and its actors is notably audience-centred and versatile in its very nature [Wagner 2005: 61–62]. "Politainment offers political actors effective means for reaching the public and pursuing political goals and, in exchange, provides the entertainment industry with celebrity figures and exciting stories. However, it is criticised for downgrading civil culture and for contributing to political cynicism." [Nieland 2015: 456–457].

Media entertainment and its various hybrids, including politainment, provide us with a wide spectrum of symbols, myths and emotional as well as intellectual stimuli [Pravdová, Hudíková & Panasenko 2020: 68–81]. However, no media entertainment can be seen as a communication space that strives to establish an authentic intercultural dialogue. Politicians, i.e., those who disseminate, inspire or profit from politainment, often utilise so-called alternative means of communication to make their public appearances look modern and dynamic. They also pretend to be in deep conflict with the hated "system" or "establishment", even though this system has created them, and they remain its essential parts and driving forces. The popularity of political entertainment thus lets us know that populism related to politainment strategies will remain a prominent framework of political communication in liberal-democratic and authoritarian countries alike.

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