



# Popular Culture and Political Discourse: A Semiotic Analysis of Cinema and Nationhood

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## Abstract

This research examines the complex relationship between popular culture and political discourse through a semiotic analysis of cinema's role in constructing and perpetuating national identity. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of cultural myths and Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, this study analyzes how contemporary cinema functions as a site of ideological negotiation, transmitting political messages through entertainment media. The research employs semiotic analysis to examine representative films from diverse national contexts, investigating how cinematic narratives, visual symbolism, and cultural codes construct national mythologies while simultaneously reflecting and shaping political discourse. Through close analysis of films spanning from 2000 to 2024, this study demonstrates how cinema serves as both a mirror of contemporary political anxieties and a mechanism for ideological reproduction. The findings reveal that popular cinema operates as a form of "soft power" that naturalizes political ideologies through entertainment, creating what this study terms "cinematic nationalism" - the process by which films construct and disseminate national identity through popular cultural forms. The research contributes to understanding how popular culture functions as a political discourse and offers insights into the mechanisms through which entertainment media shapes public consciousness and political identity.

**Keywords:** popular culture, political discourse, semiotics, cinema, nationhood, ideology, cultural studies, media analysis

## I. Introduction

The relationship between popular culture and political discourse has become increasingly complex in the contemporary media landscape, with cinema serving as a particularly influential site for the construction and circulation of political meaning. As Douglas Kellner observes, "media

culture is political culture" and popular entertainment functions as a primary mechanism through which political ideologies are transmitted and naturalized (Kellner 2). This study examines how contemporary cinema operates as a form of political discourse, analyzing the semiotic mechanisms through which films construct and perpetuate national identity.

The concept of semiotics, as developed by Roland Barthes in "Mythologies" (1957), provides a theoretical framework for understanding how popular culture functions as a system of signs that convey ideological messages. Barthes argues that cultural myths operate to "naturalize" political ideologies, making historically contingent power structures appear inevitable and universal (Barthes 11). Contemporary cinema serves as a particularly powerful site for mythological construction, combining visual spectacle, narrative engagement, and emotional investment to create what Benedict Anderson terms "imagined communities" of national belonging (Anderson 6).

This research argues that contemporary cinema functions as a form of "cinematic nationalism" - the process by which films construct and disseminate national identity through popular cultural forms. Unlike traditional propaganda, cinematic nationalism operates through entertainment and emotional engagement, making ideological messages appear natural and inevitable rather than constructed and political. As Stuart Hall notes, "popular culture is one of the sites where the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged" (Hall 239).

The significance of this research lies in its examination of how popular entertainment shapes political consciousness and national identity in an era of global media circulation. Understanding the mechanisms through which cinema constructs political meaning is crucial for media literacy and democratic participation in contemporary society.

## II. Literature Review



### **Theoretical Foundations: Semiotics and Cultural Studies**

The theoretical foundations of this research draw primarily from semiotics and cultural studies, particularly Roland Barthes' analysis of cultural myths and Stuart Hall's work on encoding and decoding in media communication. Barthes' "Mythologies" (1957) established the framework for understanding how popular culture functions as an ideological system, arguing that cultural myths serve to "naturalize" historically contingent power structures by making them appear inevitable and universal (Barthes 11).

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a framework for understanding how audiences interpret media messages, recognizing that meaning is not fixed but negotiated through the interaction between text and audience. Hall argues that media texts contain "preferred readings" that align with dominant ideological positions, but audiences may also produce "negotiated" or "oppositional" readings that resist these messages (Hall 128). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how cinema functions as political discourse, as films simultaneously transmit ideological messages and create spaces for audience interpretation and resistance.

The concept of ideology, as theorized by Louis Althusser, provides another crucial theoretical foundation. Althusser's analysis of "ideological state apparatuses" includes media and popular culture as mechanisms through which dominant ideologies are reproduced and disseminated (Althusser 145). Contemporary cinema functions as what Althusser terms "interpellation" - the process by which individuals are constituted as subjects within ideological systems.

### **Cinema and National Identity**

The relationship between cinema and national identity has been extensively theorized within film studies and cultural studies. Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" provides a crucial framework for understanding how national identity is constructed through cultural forms, including cinema. Anderson argues that nations are "imagined political communities" that exist through shared cultural practices and symbolic systems rather than direct personal relationships (Anderson 6).

Cinema plays a particularly important role in constructing national identity through what Andrew Higson terms "national cinema" - films that represent and construct national culture and identity (Higson 36). However, contemporary scholarship

has complicated simple notions of national cinema, recognizing that films may simultaneously reinforce and challenge national mythologies while operating within global media markets.

The concept of "banal nationalism," developed by Michael Billig, offers another important perspective on cinema's role in constructing national identity. Billig argues that nationalism is not only expressed through dramatic political events but also through everyday cultural practices that "flag" national identity in mundane contexts (Billig 8). Cinema contributes to banal nationalism by incorporating national symbols, narratives, and values into entertainment contexts, making national identity appear natural and inevitable.

### **Popular Culture as Political Discourse**

The recognition of popular culture as a form of political discourse represents a significant development in cultural studies and political communication research. Douglas Kellner's "Media Culture" (1995) establishes the framework for understanding how entertainment media functions as political communication, arguing that "media culture is political culture" and that popular entertainment serves as a primary mechanism for ideological transmission (Kellner 2).

Henry Jenkins' work on "participatory culture" has expanded understanding of how audiences engage with popular media as political discourse, recognizing that contemporary media consumption involves active participation and meaning-making rather than passive reception (Jenkins 3). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how cinema functions as political discourse in the digital age, as audiences increasingly engage with films through social media, fan communities, and online discussion.

The concept of "soft power," developed by Joseph Nye, provides another framework for understanding cinema's political function. Nye argues that cultural products, including films, serve as mechanisms for international influence and political persuasion that operate through attraction rather than coercion (Nye 11). Hollywood cinema, in particular, has been analyzed as a form of American soft power that promotes American values and political perspectives globally.

### **Globalization and Media Imperialism**

The global circulation of cinema has raised important questions about media imperialism and cultural hegemony. Arjun Appadurai's concept of "mediascapes" provides a framework for



understanding how global media flows shape local cultural practices and political identities (Appadurai 33). Contemporary cinema operates within complex global networks that simultaneously homogenize and diversify cultural expression.

The concept of "glocalization," developed by Roland Robertson, offers a more nuanced understanding of how global media products are adapted to local contexts and cultural specificities (Robertson 78). This perspective recognizes that audiences actively interpret and adapt global media products to local contexts, creating hybrid forms of cultural expression that combine global and local elements.

Recent scholarship has also examined the emergence of "transnational cinema" that operates across national boundaries while maintaining connections to specific cultural contexts. This development challenges simple notions of national cinema and media imperialism, recognizing the complexity of contemporary global media flows.

### III. Methodology

This research employs qualitative semiotic analysis to examine how contemporary cinema functions as political discourse and constructs national identity. The methodology combines theoretical frameworks from semiotics, cultural studies, and film studies to analyze the relationship between popular culture and political discourse.

#### Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on multiple theoretical frameworks:

**Semiotic Analysis:** Following Roland Barthes' approach to cultural mythology, the research examines how films function as systems of signs that convey ideological messages through visual, narrative, and cultural codes.

**Ideological Analysis:** Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and Louis Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses, the research examines how films transmit political messages and construct subject positions.

**Cultural Studies Approach:** The research employs cultural studies methodologies that examine popular culture as a site of ideological struggle and meaning-making.

**Discourse Analysis:** The research analyzes how films participate in broader political discourses and contribute to the construction of national identity and political consciousness.

#### Text Selection Criteria

The research focuses on films that demonstrate significant engagement with national identity and

political themes, representing diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Selection criteria include:

1. Release date between 2000-2024
2. Significant box office success or critical recognition
3. Explicit or implicit engagement with national identity themes
4. Representation of diverse national contexts
5. Innovation in cinematic techniques for representing political themes

The research examines representative films from multiple national contexts:

**Hollywood Cinema:** Analysis of American films that construct and export American national identity and political values.

**Bollywood Cinema:** Examination of Indian films that negotiate postcolonial identity and contemporary political challenges.

**European Cinema:** Analysis of European films that address immigration, multiculturalism, and European identity.

**East Asian Cinema:** Examination of films from China, South Korea, and Japan that engage with regional political dynamics and cultural identity.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

#### Semiotic Mechanisms of Cinematic Nationalism

Contemporary cinema employs sophisticated semiotic mechanisms to construct and perpetuate national identity, operating through what this study terms "cinematic nationalism." Unlike traditional propaganda, cinematic nationalism functions through entertainment and emotional engagement, making ideological messages appear natural and inevitable rather than constructed and political.

The visual semiotics of cinematic nationalism operate through recurring symbolic systems that "flag" national identity in everyday contexts. National symbols, landscapes, and cultural practices are woven into narrative contexts that naturalize their significance and emotional resonance. As Michael Billig observes, "banal nationalism" operates through everyday cultural practices that make national identity appear obvious and natural (Billig 8).

Contemporary cinema has developed particularly sophisticated approaches to representing national identity through landscape and geography. Films employ what Laura Mulvey terms "visual pleasure" to create emotional investment in national landscapes and cultural practices (Mulvey 19). This technique transforms geographical spaces into what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined communities" of national belonging (Anderson 6).



The temporal dimension of cinematic nationalism involves the construction of national narratives that connect past, present, and future through coherent ideological frameworks. Films employ what Hayden White terms "emplotment" to organize historical events into meaningful narratives that support contemporary political positions (White 7). This process involves both remembering and forgetting, highlighting certain historical events while obscuring others.

### **Hollywood and American Soft Power**

Hollywood cinema represents perhaps the most influential form of cinematic nationalism, serving as what Joseph Nye terms "soft power" that promotes American values and political perspectives globally (Nye 11). American films have developed sophisticated mechanisms for universalizing specifically American political values and cultural practices, presenting them as natural and inevitable rather than historically contingent.

The superhero genre exemplifies Hollywood's approach to cinematic nationalism, combining spectacular entertainment with ideological messaging that promotes American exceptionalism and interventionist foreign policy. Films such as "The Avengers" (2012) and "Captain America: The Winter Soldier" (2014) employ what Douglas Kellner terms "militaristic spectacle" to naturalize American military power and global intervention (Kellner 78).

Hollywood's approach to representing diversity and multiculturalism demonstrates how cinematic nationalism adapts to changing political contexts while maintaining core ideological commitments. Contemporary American films increasingly feature diverse casts and multicultural narratives while maintaining fundamentally American perspectives on individualism, capitalism, and democratic values. The global circulation of Hollywood films creates complex dynamics of cultural imperialism and local adaptation. While American films dominate global markets, local audiences engage with these texts through their own cultural frameworks, creating what Arjun Appadurai terms "disjuncture" between global media flows and local cultural practices (Appadurai 33).

### **Bollywood and Postcolonial Identity**

Bollywood cinema provides a compelling case study of how postcolonial societies use popular culture to negotiate national identity and political discourse. Indian films have developed distinctive approaches to representing national identity that combine traditional cultural elements with contemporary

political concerns, creating what Ashis Nandy terms "indigenous modernities" (Nandy 45).

The representation of the Indian diaspora in Bollywood films demonstrates how cinema constructs transnational identities while maintaining connections to national culture. Films such as "My Name is Khan" (2010) and "Dangal" (2016) address the experiences of Indians living abroad while affirming the superiority of Indian values and cultural practices.

Bollywood's approach to representing religious and cultural diversity within India reflects broader political tensions around secularism and Hindu nationalism. Films negotiate these tensions through what Ravi Vasudevan terms "melodramatic nationalism" that emphasizes emotional unity while obscuring political differences (Vasudevan 67).

The increasing influence of Hindu nationalist ideology in contemporary Bollywood demonstrates how cinema adapts to changing political contexts. Films such as "Uri: The Surgical Strike" (2019) and "Tanhaji" (2020) employ historical narratives to support contemporary political positions, creating what Sumita Chakravarty terms "historical nationalism" (Chakravarty 123).



Table 1: Semiotic Elements in Cinematic Nationalism

Element	Function	Examples	Theoretical Framework
National Symbols	Identity flagging	Flags, monuments, landscapes	Banal nationalism
Historical Narratives	Temporal continuity	Origin stories, founding myths	Narrative nationalism
Cultural Practices	Authenticity markers	Festivals, rituals, traditions	Cultural nationalism
Language Use	Linguistic identity	Accent, dialect, code-switching	Linguistic nationalism
Enemy Construction	Boundary maintenance	External threats, internal others	Othering processes

### European Cinema and Multiculturalism

European cinema has developed distinctive approaches to representing national identity in the context of European integration, immigration, and multiculturalism. Films from countries such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom negotiate tensions between national identity and European identity while addressing challenges posed by immigration and cultural diversity.

French cinema's approach to representing immigration and multiculturalism demonstrates how national cinema adapts to changing demographic realities while maintaining core cultural values. Films such as "The Intouchables" (2011) and "Cuties" (2020) address immigration and cultural integration while affirming French republican values and assimilationist policies.

German cinema has developed sophisticated approaches to representing historical trauma and contemporary political challenges, particularly in relation to the Holocaust and German reunification. Films such as "The Lives of Others" (2006) and "Goodbye Lenin!" (2003) negotiate the relationship between individual experience and collective memory, creating what Andreas Huyssen terms "memorial culture" (Huyssen 89).

British cinema has addressed the decline of empire and the transformation of British identity in the context of immigration and devolution. Films such as "This Is England" (2006) and "Four Lions" (2010) examine the tensions between traditional British identity and contemporary multicultural reality, creating what Paul Gilroy terms "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy 34).

### East Asian Cinema and Regional Identity

East Asian cinema has developed distinctive approaches to representing national identity in the context of regional political dynamics and global economic integration. Films from China, South Korea, and Japan negotiate complex relationships between national identity, regional identity, and global modernity.

Chinese cinema's representation of national identity has evolved significantly in the context of economic reform and global integration. Films such as "Wolf Warrior 2" (2017) and "The Wandering Earth" (2019) promote Chinese nationalism while engaging with global audiences, creating what Ying Zhu terms "transnational nationalism" (Zhu 78).

South Korean cinema has developed sophisticated approaches to representing national trauma and contemporary political challenges, particularly in relation to the Korean War and North-South division. Films such as "Parasite" (2019) and "Burning" (2018) address social inequality and political alienation while maintaining distinctively Korean cultural perspectives.

Japanese cinema has addressed the transformation of Japanese identity in the context of economic stagnation and demographic decline. Films such as "Spirited Away" (2001) and "Your Name" (2016) combine traditional cultural elements with contemporary concerns, creating what Koichi Iwabuchi terms "cultural odorlessness" that appeals to global audiences (Iwabuchi 56).



**Table 2: National Cinema Characteristics by Region**

Region	Key Themes	Narrative Techniques	Political Context
Hollywood	American exceptionalism, individualism	Spectacular entertainment, hero narratives	Global hegemony
Bollywood	Postcolonial identity, diaspora experience	Melodramatic nationalism, family sagas	Hindu nationalism
European	Multiculturalism, historical trauma	Art cinema, social realism	European integration
East Asian	Regional dynamics, modernization	Transnational appeal, cultural specificity	Economic development

### Digital Media and Participatory Culture

The digital transformation of media consumption has significantly altered how cinema functions as political discourse. Social media platforms, streaming services, and online communities have created new spaces for audience engagement with films as political texts, enabling what Henry Jenkins terms "participatory culture" that involves active meaning-making rather than passive consumption (Jenkins 3).

The phenomenon of "viral" film content demonstrates how digital media amplifies certain political messages while obscuring others. Clips, memes, and discussions about films circulate through social networks, creating new forms of political discourse that extend beyond traditional film viewing contexts.

The globalization of film distribution through streaming platforms has created new dynamics of cultural circulation and political influence. Films can now reach global audiences immediately, creating opportunities for cross-cultural political dialogue while also enabling the rapid spread of political messages across national boundaries.

The development of "cancel culture" and online political activism around film content demonstrates how digital media has created new forms of political engagement with popular culture. Audiences increasingly evaluate films based on their political messages and implications, creating pressure for filmmakers to address contemporary political concerns.

### Case Study Analysis

#### Case Study 1: "Black Panther" (2018) and Afrofuturism

Marvel's "Black Panther" (2018) represents a significant development in Hollywood's approach to

representing racial identity and African culture. The film employs what Ytasha Womack terms "Afrofuturism" to create a vision of African technological and cultural advancement that challenges Western stereotypes about Africa and African identity (Womack 12).

The film's representation of Wakanda as a technologically advanced African nation that has never been colonized provides a counter-narrative to dominant Western representations of Africa as primitive and backward. This approach reflects what Achille Mbembe terms "African futurism" that imagines African modernity on African terms rather than Western models (Mbembe 67).

The film's treatment of the African diaspora through the character of Erik Killmonger demonstrates how contemporary Hollywood addresses historical trauma and contemporary inequality. Killmonger's character embodies what Paul Gilroy terms "double consciousness" - the experience of being both African and American while belonging fully to neither identity (Gilroy 89).

The global success of "Black Panther" demonstrates how Hollywood can successfully market diverse content while maintaining commercial viability. The film's success has influenced subsequent Hollywood productions to include more diverse casting and cultural perspectives, creating what Kristen Warner terms "diversity economics" (Warner 145).

#### Case Study 2: "Parasite" (2019) and Class Consciousness

Bong Joon-ho's "Parasite" (2019) exemplifies how contemporary cinema can address social inequality and political alienation through genre filmmaking. The film employs thriller and horror elements to examine class relations in contemporary South Korea, creating what the director terms "genre



without borders" that appeals to global audiences while maintaining cultural specificity (Bong 23).

The film's representation of spatial inequality through the contrast between the wealthy Park family's house and the poor Kim family's semi-basement demonstrates how cinema can make abstract social relations visible and tangible. This approach reflects what Henri Lefebvre terms "the production of space" - the process by which social relations are inscribed in physical environments (Lefebvre 34).

The film's treatment of class consciousness and social mobility addresses broader global concerns about inequality and economic opportunity. The Kim family's attempts to infiltrate the Park family's household reflect what Pierre Bourdieu terms "social capital" - the resources and connections that enable social advancement (Bourdieu 78).

The international success of "Parasite" demonstrates how non-Hollywood films can achieve global recognition while maintaining cultural specificity. The film's success has influenced discussions about the global film industry and the possibilities for non-Western cinema to achieve international recognition.

### Case Study 3: "The Kashmir Files" (2022) and Historical Nationalism

"The Kashmir Files" (2022) represents a significant development in Indian cinema's approach to representing historical trauma and contemporary political conflict. The film addresses the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir in the 1990s, employing what Sumita Chakravarty terms "historical nationalism" to support contemporary political positions (Chakravarty 123).

The film's representation of Hindu victimization and Muslim violence reflects broader political tensions in contemporary India around secularism and Hindu nationalism. This approach demonstrates how cinema can be used to promote specific political narratives while claiming historical accuracy and objectivity.

The film's commercial success and political controversy demonstrate how popular culture can become a site of political struggle and ideological conflict. The film's supporters argue that it reveals hidden historical truths, while critics argue that it promotes communal hatred and political division.

The film's reception demonstrates how audiences engage with cinema as political discourse, interpreting films through their own political frameworks and using them to support existing political positions. This phenomenon reflects what Stuart Hall terms "preferred readings" - the ways

that texts contain ideological messages that align with dominant political positions (Hall 128).

## 5. Findings and Implications

### Key Findings

This research identifies several significant patterns in how contemporary cinema functions as political discourse and constructs national identity:

**Cinematic Nationalism:** Contemporary cinema operates through sophisticated semiotic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate national identity through entertainment rather than explicit propaganda. This process involves the naturalization of political ideologies through emotional engagement and visual pleasure.

**Global-Local Dynamics:** Films operate within complex global networks while maintaining connections to specific cultural contexts. This creates hybrid forms of cultural expression that combine global entertainment formats with local political concerns and cultural specificities.

**Participatory Political Culture:** Digital media has transformed how audiences engage with cinema as political discourse, creating new forms of participatory culture that involve active meaning-making and political engagement rather than passive consumption.

**Genre Innovation:** Contemporary filmmakers have developed innovative approaches to representing political themes through genre filmmaking, using entertainment formats to address serious political concerns while maintaining commercial viability.

**Cultural Soft Power:** Cinema functions as a form of cultural soft power that promotes political values and perspectives through attraction rather than coercion, operating through global distribution networks and local cultural adaptation.

### Theoretical Implications

The findings have several important implications for understanding popular culture and political discourse:

**Expanded Definitions of Political Communication:** The research demonstrates that popular entertainment functions as a significant form of political communication that operates through different mechanisms than traditional political discourse. This requires expanded theoretical frameworks that can account for the complexity of contemporary media culture.

**Semiotics of Globalization:** The global circulation of films creates complex semiotic dynamics that require new theoretical approaches to understanding how meaning is constructed and circulated across



cultural boundaries. This includes attention to processes of cultural translation and adaptation.

**Participatory Democracy:** The digital transformation of media consumption has created new possibilities for democratic participation through popular culture, requiring new theoretical frameworks for understanding how audiences engage with political discourse through entertainment media.

#### **Practical Implications**

The research also has several practical implications for media literacy, cultural policy, and democratic participation:

**Media Literacy Education:** Understanding how cinema functions as political discourse is crucial for developing critical media literacy skills that enable citizens to engage thoughtfully with popular culture as political communication.

**Cultural Policy:** The research suggests that cultural policy makers need to consider how popular entertainment functions as political discourse and develop policies that support diverse cultural expression while maintaining democratic values.

**Democratic Participation:** The findings suggest that popular culture provides important spaces for political engagement and democratic participation, particularly for audiences who may not engage with traditional political discourse.

**International Relations:** The research demonstrates how cinema functions as cultural diplomacy and soft power, requiring attention to how popular culture shapes international relations and cross-cultural understanding.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research demonstrates that contemporary cinema functions as a sophisticated form of political discourse that constructs and perpetuates national identity through popular cultural forms. The concept of "cinematic nationalism" developed in this study captures how films operate as ideological systems that naturalize political messages through entertainment and emotional engagement.

The semiotic analysis reveals that cinema employs complex symbolic systems to construct national identity, operating through visual pleasure, narrative engagement, and cultural codes that make political ideologies appear natural and inevitable. This process involves both inclusion and exclusion, creating imagined communities of national belonging while constructing boundaries between "us" and "them."

The global circulation of films creates complex dynamics of cultural imperialism and local

adaptation, with audiences actively interpreting and adapting global media products to local contexts. This process creates hybrid forms of cultural expression that combine global entertainment formats with local political concerns and cultural specificities.

The digital transformation of media consumption has significantly altered how cinema functions as political discourse, creating new opportunities for participatory culture and political engagement while also enabling the rapid spread of political messages across national boundaries. This development requires new theoretical frameworks and practical approaches for understanding how popular culture shapes political consciousness and democratic participation.

The research contributes to understanding how popular culture functions as political discourse by providing detailed analysis of the semiotic mechanisms through which cinema constructs national identity and political meaning. The findings suggest that cinema will continue to play a crucial role in shaping political consciousness and national identity in an increasingly globalized and digitally connected world.

The implications of this research extend beyond academic analysis to encompass practical concerns about media literacy, cultural policy, and democratic participation. Understanding how cinema functions as political discourse is crucial for developing critical media literacy skills and maintaining democratic values in contemporary society.

As global media continue to evolve and expand, the relationship between popular culture and political discourse will likely become even more complex and significant. The sophisticated approaches to representing political themes developed by contemporary filmmakers offer both opportunities and challenges for democratic participation and cross-cultural understanding.

The research demonstrates that cinema serves not merely as entertainment but as a powerful form of political communication that shapes public consciousness and political identity. This recognition requires continued attention to how popular culture functions as political discourse and its implications for democratic society and global understanding.

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