Abstract  Political scientists are increasingly interested in popular culture. Movies notably reflect on social and political changes. However, movies are sometimes seen as mirrors of common ideologies and fears, such as alien attacks or zombie apocalypses. This paper gives an overview on the current importance of research of movies in Political Science; a trend that is often coined as part of the turn towards popular culture in Social Sciences. This essay discusses theoretical and empirical approaches to movies, how the usual perception of ‘quality TV’ has changed over the last years – the so called HBO-effect – and not least, why the new trend towards the interpretation of movies is of importance for political education.

Movies and Politics

“Winter is coming” is a phrase from the popular television series Game of Thrones. In 2013, prior to the Australian federal election, the later to become Prime Minister Tony Abbott was photoshopped on to the Iron Throne from the same television series. The picture’s message was to criticize Tony Abbott for budget cuts in the social system and it was often shared on social networks. Pictures like this might be so popular because they are directly linked to people’s emotions and fears about current political events (Hamenstädt 2015). This reflects the growing importance of images for policy design and action. Policy makers are aware of the growing importance of media coverage since many years.

It is important to see how the image of ‘the politician’ is addressed through movies and popular culture in general. In 1968, the British rock band Cream released their last album “Wheels of Fire”. Lead vocalist and bass player Jack Bruce portrays an opportunistic and selfish person in these 12 bare blues-rock song, avoiding the political dispute. This very negative attitude towards politics and politicians can be found in a lot of popular media
contents. Franke and Schiltz (2013) name their study on political worldviews in popular music with the title of the Michael Jackson song “They Don't Really Care About Us!” So there might be a constant of portraying politics as something evil, counter to the interests and believes of the broader public. One might see a lot of similarities between this image of modern, medialized politics and the portraying of politics in movies and TV-series. However protagonists in popular TV-series like Francis Underwood in the series *House of Cards* (since 2013) seem to represent the same kind of politician as pictured above. Notably in the last years, the productions of drama series lasting between 50 and 100 hours became popular and many Social Scientists identify this drama series as the new quality TV (Dellwing and Harbusch 2015) - often called the HBO-effect. Early productions like *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) are outstanding in regard to some specific elements. Screenwriter Alan Ball, best known for *American Beauty* (1999), wanted to touch taboo subjects in our society, such as homosexuality and death. So the drama series was set up from the beginning as kind of a political project. One of the older but until today nonetheless famous productions of HBO *The Wire* (2002-2008) is also unusual in respect of certain aspects. First, there is no protagonist at the center of the story. The drama series centers around the city of Baltimore (Maryland) and its economic turndown (Wheeler 2014). There are different elements of description and critique of how the city council’s politics, the school system, newspapers and everyday life in general are affected by the economic meltdown of Baltimore as a seaport town.

So Social Scientists are confronted with a plurality of different topics that could be analyzed within movies and TV series. Also, movies are a highly dense form of information – film story, sound, light, camera technique etc. Most of the current work in the field of Social Science film analysis focuses less on technical aspects of movies, but on what happens in front of the camera, notably the textual body of movies and their plots. Social Scientists like Cynthia Weber (2009) discusses filming techniques as a part of interpretations of movies. However, Weber got a background as a filmmaker. For most Social Scientists an analysis of the textual body and the story often gives more than enough material for an essay.
What I am aiming to do in this essay is, first, to situate myself as an author in these ongoing debates. In doing so, I will shortly describe my personal path to analyzing movies as a part of everyday life with (often) a political impact. Also as a starting point for this essay, the critical analysis of the film industry from its earliest days has to be discussed. In the second section of this essay I will discuss different ideas of how movies could be approached by Social Scientists. Starting with the Zombie Boom in popular movies and TV series, I will argue that Alfred Hitchcock’s idea to see movies as a ‘rear’ and ‘window’ at the same time can be a very useful idea. In the last section I am going to discuss some didactical issues while using movies in higher education teaching before I am going to conclude this essay.

How to get started

Over the last years, I met many colleagues who use movies or parts of movies in their teaching. I am always thrilled by the range of different applications. While some colleagues use movies to spice up their teaching, others explain technical aspects of media “staged and constructed” politics. While some want to explain theories or methods in Social Sciences, others focus on narratives and e.g. how other countries are framed. My reason for using film in higher education teaching and to start publishing about this topic was a very intuitive one. When I was a PhD student, an old friend from school invited me to a barbecue just after his second child was born. I enjoyed the party not only because of the barbecue, but also because I was playing in the garden with his oldest son. My friend’s son, he must have been three at that time, asked me if I’d like to listen to his favourite audio play. It turned out that he had the same taste in audio plays I had when I was about his age – my parents still roll their eyes when they are reminded, because I used to listen to the same audio plays over and over again. However, my friend’s son’s and my favourite audio play was about an elephant called *Benjamin Blümchen*; it has been popular among children in Germany since its release in the late 1970s.¹ Listening to that audio play for children after years, I was surprised about the story and the style of narration. The story can be easily summarized: The mayor of a little town is planning to build a speedway through the forest. The mayor is pictured as a selfish and ignorant person – calling himself a king to later be reminded that he is “only” the mayor. The mayor is the only politician in the story. The reason for building the speedway was that the he wants to travel to his mother’s house for teatime faster. The elephant tries to prevent

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¹ There are a few publications on the topic of Benjamin Blümchen as an audio play for children and about attitude toward politics mediated through these plays (Strohmeier 2005). It is controversial how protest and the mayor are portrayed in the audio plays (Emde 2016).
the construction project by organizing a large civil protest against it. Listening to such an audio play after years and recently having finished my master in political science, the elephant appears to me as a ‘classical environmentalist entrepreneur’, organizing protest against the political official in his town. The play ended with a huge success for the citizens and therefore with the victory of the environment over the evil politician. The audio play ended with a nice sing-along-song I still remember from my childhood. Because I did not remember the words exactly but only the melody of the song, I just listened to the lyrics and it took me by surprise: the lyrics literally said that Benjamin (the elephant) loves all human beings, even ‘policemen’. By this time, I was more amused than puzzled by what I heard and I did not know that this was the prelude of a lager essayistic project I would come up with colleagues in a couple of years.

So the journey that started with that day got its starting point in a discovery of a very intuitive and simple relation: Our everyday life is highly political. When we seek amusements, like going to the movies, we are already part of complex social structure. The movies we watch are products of the film industry. A ‘blockbuster’ is a movie with specific characteristics and maintaining a strict narrative formula that is often highly predictable. These movies are produced to sell to a broader audience. Sharks (1975) by Steven Spielberg, was the first blockbuster. So a complex decision making process is preceding the production of a film, arranging how the product sells to a broader audience, how the characters have to be written to achieve this goal etc. When the movie is aired in cinemas, we are part of a strange reality; Michel Foucault wrote in the 1970s that the cinema is a quarter hall where on one end on a two dimensional screen a three dimensional space is watched (Foucault 2012, 122). Before Foucault wrote about the cinema as a special social place, Horkheimer and Adorno (1969/2006) analysed movies as part of the popular culture. When we watch Scrooge McDuck hitting Donald Duck, the amusement of the audience is connected to the pain of being Donald Duck in reality; the rich guy is allowed to punish the poorer companion. By watching this, Horkheimer and Adorno (1969/2006, 147) argue in their essay on the culture industry, we get used to the pain and when we walk out of the movie theatre the dazzling is gone and we feel the coldness of the world again. For Adorno, films like King Kong from the year 1933 are placeholders for the rise of the giant and totalitarian states of the era (Martin 2013, 39). These are just a few examples that lead us to the conclusion that most movies are political, even when they seem to be pure amusement. What is political can be analysed by political theory. To turn this conclusion upside down: political theory cannot only help our understanding of movies, but movies can help our understanding of political theory. So it is
no surprise that movies are increasingly discussed within the context of teaching (for an overview see Swimelar 2013; Hamenstädt 2014).

This is a book about political theory and movies. The underlying key assumption of all essays collected in this edited volume is, that movies bring up social issues and problems that are also discussed in political theories. The interplay between political theory and different movies inspired a lot of publications in recent years. Just to mention a few: notably in International Relations research, films became a popular subject throughout the last few years (Kiersey and Neumann 2013; Neumann and Nexon 2006; Weber 2009). Also the reflection of geopolitical actions of the US have been analysed throughout the lens of popular movies (Shapiro 1999, 2009; Weber 2006). *Star Trek* is one of the outstanding examples. A star ship is flying through ‘endless spaces’, bringing ideas and norms of the ‘western culture’ to other, undiscovered civilisations – of course, the Borg are the counterpart of this scenario and a representation of the Eastern Bloc at this time. More dated than Star Trek might be the zombie hype (Dellwing and Harbusch 2015; Drezner 2011; Rushton and Duten 2016). There is always a time related understanding of horror. However, when we think about Adorno’s *King Kong*, we get an impression of what was scary in the 1930s. In the 70s and 80s there were science fiction and alien movies; a danger from out of space threatening ‘the civilized world’. This can also be understood as the reflection of the omnipresent danger from the atomic bomb. Therefore movies are, however, historical documents. Movies are documenting the time of their production and the social context of the audience. Zombies therefore can be understood as a reaction towards international terrorism; a virus infecting people, turning the world into an apocalyptic place where survivors have to kill the zombies like things without a soul. The idea of a virus turning even loved ones into brainless killer machines can be understood as a representation of the fear of terrorism. And international terrorism is one of the big political topics of our time (Sändig 2016). Movies – like music, advertising etc. – play with the emotions of the audience. It is also possible to observe political meaning in the subtext of movies and TV series. „Using film is a way of researching what normally remains invisible…“ (Attili and Sandercock 2012, 183). The authors of this short quote address the planning of urban space; but what can be said for urban space can be true for many other parts of social life. Notably the fact that what ‘normally remain invisible’ becomes visible through film, makes the medium interesting for many Social Sciences. All essays in this volume work with these three key dimensions: the (social) context of the film, the viewpoint(s) of the receivers and last but not least the subtext of the medium.
It is not only the subtlety of movies, which lets us reflect on social meanings and ‘cultural’ factors. For example, the reactions on the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) tell us a lot about the society we are living in. Movies might also be able to express feelings about social change: *The curious case of Benjamin Button* (2008) deals with different experiences of time. The blind clockmaker who invents a clock that is running backwards to bring back his son who died in the war, speaks about our changing perception of time nowadays. We are living in a time, where the huge clocks in the station concourse are not technical innovations anymore; these clocks are disappearing more and more out of the public sphere (Rosa 2005). Everybody owns a watch or a mobile phone, which might substitute the watch, and this is what makes former technical innovations redundant. Changing lifestyle and different experiences of time are the obvious topics of *The curious case of Benjamin Button* (2008). So the movie is not about a ‘curious case’ or about a historical period, it is about the time we are living in today and the social changes in our lives we experience. But what is important to underline here, is that the movie could be – of course – watched with the sociological background on the notion of time, but it can also (just) be watched as joyful, entertaining movie. So there is always a multitude of different ways of watching a movie. What the essays in this volume do is to suggest one way of ‘reading’ a movie or a serial. On the one hand the essays offer a way of watching movies; maybe your favourite movie is presented in the volume in a way, you never thought about it before. On the other hand, and that is the main purpose of this volume, dealing with movies as an ‘empirical case’ helps to shed light on specific aspects of a theory. Movies present a plurality of different social aspects. But they are also offering interpretations. Movies are repeating (theoretical) elements, which are the notions of power and utopia. Both elements are recurrent themes throughout this volume and will be shortly outlined in the next section.

**Movies and worldviews**

Movies, however, can be seen as more or less clear political and social statements. Often they present some kind of a ‘worldview’ on specific topics, as well as leaning on a common view of the world at the same time. Therefore it is worth looking at presentation of social and political ideas of society. Well, let us think about the hype of Zombie Movie in the last years. While in the 1970th the Zombie was presented in movies as a part of a critic of the consumer society; Zombies populated department stores in such movies, because people are doing what they have done before they died – they do brainless shopping in the stores. Nowadays TV series like *The Walking Dead* (since 2010) are presenting an utopian society after the demise
of the civilization as we know it. Utopian societies are a recurring theme in popular movies. Like *1984* (1984), based on George Orwell’s novel of the same name, that picture a dystopian fiction of a society under total control of an authoritarian leader. So Orwell’s 1984 is an anti-utopia; a dark fiction and a reflection of Stalin’s dictatorship. Therefore (anti-)utopian narratives in movies are always connected to ideas of political power. Thinking about power and power relations from a political viewpoint, we also have to discuss the limits of political. Utopian ideas are often described as the limit of the political; in this view Utopia is the border of what is political and what is not. I would like to reject this viewpoint and argue instead, that utopian thoughts are important for political ideas. Starting with Thomas Morus’ book about Utopia, we understand the description of what was thought of as a perfect society during this time. Today, utopian ideas are important to think and act outside the box and with it an important source for politics too. Movies combine the different dimensions between society, politics and fiction perfectly. Most blockbusters are based on a social myth; an idea about how society could be and what role the individual could (or should) play within it. One of the best known myths is the frontier of the American west. The myth came to an end when the Pacific Ocean was reached. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘The Great Gatsby’ is about the expiration of this myth and the movie remake *Gatsby* (2013) captures the social reaction upon the end of the myth. The renewal of ‘the West’ as a myth in movies can be divided into three steps (Hamenstädt 2016): first, in the idea of the Wild West. The cowboy is the medium of this myth, which contains freedom and masculinity. Until today, actor John Wayne is the raw model for this clarification of masculinity. Second, modernisation and the locomotion play an important role in the “civilizing” of the Wild West. *Once Upon a Time in the West* is a story of how the ‘social capital’ of the cowboys is devaluated by the process of modernization (Beckershoff 2016). Last but not least, there is the myth of the (Wild) West in the movie industry and how the idea is picked up and re-produced in different blockbusters. History and reality are not simply facts from this viewpoint, they are stories and interpretations of what could be reality. This game between stories and interpretation of the story is combined in the idea of the utopian; it is, in this view, not the limit of possibilities, it is the starting point. This interplay between subjectivity and objectivity is best captured in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954). In the plot we have James Stewart sitting in a wheel chair after breaking his leg. While observing his neighbour through his rear window for days, he is convinced that he became witness to a murder. While the movie presents all the facts, the puzzle is still how to interpret a short time period when the light was turned off in the neighbour’s apartment. So on one hand we have the facts – the window we can look through and which shows us the
‘reality’ – and the rear that leaves space for interpretations. This play between subjectivity (rear) and objectivity (window) is what we get as the audience of a movie. Movies have to take our reality into account and have to leave space for interpretation as well. So there is always a multitude of different possible interpretations of a movie.

**Movies in teaching Political Sciences**

With regard to the existing scientific literature, movies are often framed as a popular teaching tool or a medium in teaching in Political Science. There are multiple ways of establishing movies as a teaching tool in the classroom, however we can already observe a number of disputes about this topic.

Some colleagues argue that movies are a fitting tool to spice up teaching, but his could be a dangerous argument for the use of movies in higher education teaching. First, some of our students might have experienced situations at school, where supply teachers filled gaps in the curriculum by showing movies or documentaries. Applying the same ‘approach’ to one’s own teaching is not very rewarding and worthwhile. And this is where the second point has to be discussed, movies should be treated as a teaching tool, and teaching tools should be always applied in respect to the teaching goals (Hamenstädt and Hellmann 2015). These teaching goals can for example range from making students understand specific elements of a theory better to making students apply a method of analysis (Heck and Schlag 2015). There are always different ways of adopting films in higher education teaching. However, this point might be the most controversial, because first, in some cases lectures find it difficult to specify teaching goals they want students to take away in their courses, and second, what is closely related to that, there is often a subtext to the official verbalization of the teaching goals. Not at least, students are sometimes not so interested in the teaching goals of the course there is sometimes no need to make them explicit for the course. However, it makes sense to make teaching goals explicit – at least – for one self and then ask then question, if movies are beneficial to reach these goals. Even in times, where many journal articles present movies as a popular teaching tool, we should not forget to use the medium film with caution.

The second point I would like to pick for the discussion here is the use of documentaries in teaching. While documentaries are often seen as an appropriate approach to bring additional information into the classroom, we should also be cautious with documentaries. My point is that documentaries offer information. Not only that in presenting these information, sometimes a single perspective is dominate, but more important knowledge has to emerge.
later on the base of the information. Also with respect to the growing popularity of documentaries we have to consider changing viewing pattern and habits. Once documentaries have been a product of public service broadcasting, but this has changed since *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) was produced successfully for cinema audience. Today, many movies, documentaries and TV series are also accessible via streaming capable devices at any place and time. We have to be aware, that students may follow different patterns of watching movies and therefore have different ways of gathering information. Also with respect to the launch of new documentaries for a cinema audience, we also have to be cautious of the main or final massage. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) offers some ideas on CO\textsuperscript{2} reduction at the end. Some might argue that this is a novel approach and it doesn’t leave the audience alone, after being confronted with many environmental problems and are in need of recommendations what they can do. In contrast, others argue that the documentary falls far behind the issue it is aimed to mediate. While Al Gore wants to convey an important message and discusses a lot of complex issues, the final message seem to offer a reductionist solution; while *An Inconvenient Truth* focus on complexity, historical and social issues, the simplifying massage “You can change something” does not seems to be appropriate for the subject. So for teaching purposes, it is important not only to watch the documentary and treat it as a source of information, but to discuss what the mediums subject is and how it is mediated. At this point you can for example discuss advantages and shortcomings of the medium and ways of presenting information or emotionalisation of content.

Not at least, as discussed earlier in this easy, movies can also be a door opener towards taboo subjects. Alan Ball´s productions like *American Beauty* (1999) or *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) have been mentioned, which have been subject to a couple of publications (see e.g. Deacy, 2002). Touching taboo subjects can be difficult and emotional for students too. I am aware of the fact that emotions of students are often a disputed topic in higher education teaching. But I would like to suggest, that we have to discuss and reflect emotion with our students in class to be able to make a progress in terms of objectivity: Sometimes we have to ask ourselves not what we think about an argument or a case, but what emotions it triggers within ourselves. This can be the door opener to a more objective debate. So the questing might be at this point, what the animation of a drown polar bear triggers in oneself and, second, why is it different from statistics of global change? There we are already at the presenting information within a specific medium.
Conclusion

In her book about modern cities, the German sociologist Martina Löw (2012) argues that interviews with citizens reflect one thing: People are influenced by different narratives of (their) cities; when researchers interview inhabitants of a region or a specific city, interviewees often use the vocabulary and ‘pictures’ from TV series or movies about that region. So it is not surprising that city marketing strategies can be based on popular movies (Schmidt-Thomé and Niemenmaa 2014) or that the image of cities in movies is analyzed (Duarte et al 2015). Here it is important to note that on a theoretical level a movie can be understood as a frame or a window for reality. There are specific narratives and worldviews of how media contend could be interpreted, but the ‘consumer’ is always aware (Hall et al. 1980; Fiske 1987). And, as discussed in this essay, there are also changing patterns of production and ‘consumption’ of movies and TV series. These changes have to be considered, among other things, when movies or documentaries are introduced into the classroom.

However, there are many examples of how popular culture might frame our understanding of the world. To a certain level, movies mirror our society and therefore politics too. As I have argued in this essay, many movies or TV series could not be so successful without there conation to reality, or e.g. to global politics. Let us take the James Bond movies as an example. During the cold war era, the Bond’s counterparts often came from Russia. In contrast, the current Bond movies present 007 as a classical action hero, fighting attacks on the head quarter of the MI6 and organized crime from China. So the enemy has dramatically changed during the last decades and this reflects what we as an audience are scared of. Was it once the ‘East’ or the ‘bomb’ that was threatening the Bond audience, the contemporary Bond movies might suggest that nowadays the dangers or enemies of the “Western Societies” are already within the countries. However, there is also an interplay between change and continuity in gender relation in the Bond movies. In general, gender relations are very interesting topic within the analysis of popular culture (Shepherd 2013). To consider the Bond example, James Bond could also be understood as the representation of a male dream – Freedom, fast cars, beautiful girls, etc. Also the character of Miss Moneypenny has dramatically changed over time.

The image of cities and the Bond movies are just two examples for staring points of analyzing movies in Social Science. It is not surprising, by what was discussed in this short essay, that the scope of application for such investigations into popular media and movies is dominated by researchers from the field of international relations and security studies, as well as
publications about teaching. Also the staging of politics in television can be an interesting point for further investigations. However, the aim of this essay was more limited and therefore focused on an overview of how movies and TV series as a part of popular culture could be a source for research and teaching in Social Sciences.
References


