

# **THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY: A STUDY OF THE ORGANIZATION THROUGH THE LENS OF POPULAR FILMS OF THE WESTERN WORLD.**

**Dr Elizabeth Lomas, Associate Professor in Information Governance, Department of Information Studies, University College London, UK.**

**Professor Vanda Broughton, Emeritus Professor of Library and Information Studies, Department of Information Studies, University College London, UK.**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Purpose - This chapter examines portrayals of the morality of organizations using the lens of Western films. The work explores six decades of film analyzing the organizational contexts and their agents, in order to understand film makers' and audiences' perceptions of organizational settings.*

*Methodology/approach - In order, to examine the organization as an entity within film this chapter provides a content analysis of plot summaries from a purposefully selected body of top grossing box office films spanning 60 years. The plot summaries constitute a strong basis for identifying the characteristics of the organization as they are largely descriptive in nature, and as such do not offer any evaluation or analysis of the film. Any assumptions about the character of organizations (or their members/employees) are unconscious, and as such they constitute a verbal description of what competent observers would say has occurred within the film. The plots were coded to reveal perceptions of positive, neutral or negative organizational contexts and actions.*

*Findings – This approach exposed the film makers symbolic placing of the organization in order to provide backdrops for the narrative. The plot analysis revealed that throughout the decades there has been a sophisticated portrayal in film of the role of the organization and the agents therein. A generally negative view of organizational contexts is demonstrated, with only religion and education showing as positive within the films selected.*

*Research limitations and implications – It is recognised that there would be value in extending this research to analyze a larger body of works. The selection criteria resulted in a wide but not comprehensive corpus of film genres. The body of works was sufficient to reveal the complexity of attitudes to organizational values and delivery which has evolved through time. Different selection criteria and more substantial narrative text could serve to confirm these results. Further implications for future research are discussed.*

*Social/Practical implications – Whilst in the real-life sphere there has been an emphasis on organizational standards and 'corporate governance' delivering ethical exemplars, the film contexts highlight the complexities of delivering trusted organizations. The reality that there remains the potential for organizational corruption is well understood by the general public and clearly depicted within the film world.*

*Originality – The conceptual contribution is original as limited work has been conducted on the organizational context in films. This work reveals the possibility of using this approach to further develop a greater understanding of perceptions of organizations.*

**Keywords:** Moral exemplar; organization; popular films.

## INTRODUCTION

This article examines the portrayal of the ‘organization’ in popular Western films through the lens of a purposefully selected sample of English language films spanning six decades. Films and plots are driven by the actions and narratives of people or characters whether robot, alien or animal with human characteristics. In many films, the narrative is moved forwards through goals and conflicts where the organization provides a backdrop to the action that delivers a symbolic context for the plotline. The visualisation of the organizations in film and the ways in which organizations are introduced as worthy of ‘defending’ or ‘breaking’ provides insight into how society aligns with or challenges the values of the organizational entity.

As noted by Cameron and Spreitzer (2012, p.232), “empirical investigations of virtuousness are rare, especially within organizations”. An occasional exception is Resnick (2000) which examines the portrayal of private schools in film. Within the selected films the organization provides the context, rather than the main theme of the film. This provides the expectation that what is said about it will be largely tacit, or assumed, knowledge rather than a considered position, or one that intends to make a specific statement. The aim of this exploration is to establish whether the organizations are perceived as having a moral stance, either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, in the role within the film action and what this reveals about attitudes to organizational settings.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### *Film critical and non-specialist methodologies*

The methodology in this paper necessarily takes the form of film analysis. Film analysis is now a well-established sub-field within the discipline of film studies, and there are various standard introductory guides to film analysis techniques, such as Rose (2006), Geiger and Rutsky (2005), Lewis (2014) and Caldwell (2011). Approaches to film analysis differ in various ways. At the broadest level analysts may have different fundamental objectives in mind: for example, adoption of a particular conceptual approach to film; identification of thematic or topical content; film categorization by mood or genre classification. A general typology of film analysis is proposed by Aumont and Marie (1988) categorising the picture and sound approach as primarily iconic in nature, in contrast to the narrative approach (based on topic), the structural approach (based on text) in addition to psychoanalytical and historical approaches. Other methodologies may focus on the meaning and symbolism of film as in semiotic analysis.

Methodologies also differ in what of the film’s content is analyzed, although, conventionally, academic film analysis evaluates audio-visual and technical aspects of the film such as the cinematography, sound, and composition of individual shots, and, occasionally, music (Neumeyer & Buhler, 2015). Peritextual material, external to the text of the film proper, such as promotional material, ‘posters, stills, and images from other films’ can also be considered as essential to the understanding of the film (Capussotti, et al., 2004, p. 258). This complexity of film content addressed in film analysis is confirmed by Geiger and Rutsky (2005, p.2):

As opposed to casual discussions and reviews, film analysis, or criticism, strives to examine in detail the myriad narrative, thematic, and formal choices that are part of

every film... It is a process of thinking in focused and creative ways ... about the complex potential meanings that reside within the elements of the film text.

Alternatively, the analysis may be conducted through textual representations of film including the script, synopses, plot lines, or reviews. The *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Kuhn, 2012) provides a general definition of textual analysis as:

The systematic activity of breaking a film down into its constituent formal elements, especially those of narrative and style. ... Originally developed alongside semiotics and structuralism, early ventures in textual analysis involved formal descriptions of textual systems, isolating a small number of codes and tracing in great detail their interweaving throughout an entire film. ... Today the term textual analysis is commonly used in looser reference to any more-or-less detailed breakdown or close reading of a film. (Kuhn, 2012)

From the perspective of the film studies scholar, the analysis of the 'text' of a film needs to be understood in a particular way. Although it is reasonable for a non-specialist to assume that 'text' is essentially the linguistic component of a film, film studies scholars routinely refer to a film per se as 'a text', "[a] primary source ... which in film courses is normally a film, a group of films, or other texts ...." (Geiger & Rutsky, 2005, p.1020). In this sense the whole of the film constitutes the text rather than the narrowly 'verbal' aspect. The film as text is therefore a multi-layered phenomenon, with a high degree of intertextuality, contingent upon the analyst's familiarity with, and understanding of, the conventions of film as a medium. Allen et al. (1997, p. 90) make the additional point that much formal film analysis from within the discipline consists of the interpretive analysis of meaning in an individual film, rather than the identification of general trends and perceptions in the content of films more generally.

A number of papers outside the discipline of film studies consider the representation of various topics in film. For the most part, these relate to the depiction of human roles or characteristics, which appear to be easier to determine than more abstract notions. It is clear that the minority group, of various kinds, is the most commonly encountered of these thematic analyses. These include ethnic minorities, such as native Americans (Rollins & O'Connor, 1998), and various kinds of disabilities (Safran, 1998a, 1998b; Arokiasamy, 1996), such as epilepsy (Kerson et al., 2000). There is also representation of some functional or occupational groups: female athletes (Wuestenberg & Todd, n.d.), archivists (Oliver & Daniel, 2015), lawyers (Beard, 2011) and policemen (Reinhardt et al., 2014), as well as political and religious groupings: Communism (Khouri, 2007), radical Islamists (Fachinger, 2011), and the Klu Klux Klan (Dessommes, 1999). More general themes include the tobacco industry (Dixon et al., 2001) and modernist architecture (Heathcote, 2000). In a few cases the research involves the testing of public response to the depiction of the theme (Dixon et al., 2001; Reinhardt et al., 2014), but in most studies the methodology consists simply of narrative content analysis. In several of the papers (Beard, 2011; Dessommes, 1999; Dixon et al., 2001) there is no explicit methodology, but the portrayal of the topic is clearly based on narrative aspects of the plot and the observed personality of the characters.

In these examples, text based film analysis may be considered as broadly comparable with other types of qualitative content analysis which involve the identification of implicit content or meaning through coding of the text. Various units of analysis are employed including

scripts, synopses, plot summaries and reviews; observers' notes on the narrative of the film may also inform the analysis.

Allen et al. (1997) attempts to identify the crime film using a corpus of plot synopses of all general releases in a period of 47 years, and provides a form of methodology appropriate to this study. Their choice of the film synopsis as the unit of assessment is related to the unavailability of many, particularly older, films, and the fact that, "determining whether it [the film] contains ... content central to the narrative can be achieved with reasonable accuracy without viewing, provided sufficient descriptive information is available" (Allen et al., 1997, p. 91). This methodology is derived from an early work on film content by Dale (1935) which uses narrative descriptions of films as the units of analysis, and which asserts that film content, "constitutes a verbal description of what competent observers say has occurred on the motion picture screen" (Dale, 1935, p. 7). It is the audience's perspective of the film maker's presentation.

### *Sourcing the data*

In order to examine the organization as an entity within films, this chapter provides a content analysis of plot summaries. These summaries, sourced from popular film websites, are provided in general by non-academics, film-goers and film enthusiasts, rather than film scholars or professional critics. The plot summaries therefore constitute a stronger basis for identifying the public perception of characteristics of the organization within films, as opposed to critical reviews of the sample films, or the films themselves. These summaries are largely descriptive in nature, and as such they do not offer any evaluation or analysis of the film. Hence any assumptions about the character of organizations (or their members/employees) are unconscious, and shared by the audience as a whole. For the purpose of analysis, the summaries were required to be a minimum of 500 words in length. Longer summaries were preferred as the organization often features as the backdrop context and so within shorter summaries this organizational context tended to be omitted. Although it would have been preferable to use one source for the summaries, no single source provided comprehensive coverage of our sample; changing the selection criteria would not have rectified the situation, so a variety of sources were ultimately employed. These included (in order of preference):

- Dirks, Tim *filmsite* [www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)
- *International movie database* (IMDb) <http://www.imdb.com>
- *Turner Classic Movies* <http://www.tcm.com/>
- *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/> (under the names of individual films)

These sites were used to build the corpus of data. Within each decade a central year was taken from 1940s to the current day. From the selected year, the top three box office grossing films were identified. From 1985-2015 it was possible to obtain worldwide economic film data. Before 1980 the global data was not available and therefore the data for the top grossing films in the USA were utilised. All the films identified through this earlier USA data did have a circulation outside of the USA. This data provides evidence of 'popular' films released in each decade. This provided a corpus of 24 films for review. It is acknowledged that this provides a Western lens for the analysis. An additional limitation on the research is that the plot summaries are not necessarily contemporaneous with the films, an unavoidable problem

because of the unavailability of older material. Just as Dale (1935, p.7) justifies the use of the verbal description as a reliable representation of the film content in lieu of the film itself, we are confident that the synopsis, as a descriptive rather than evaluative source, remains a reasonable surrogate for the purpose of analysis.

Having selected the film corpus, the plot summary of each film was manually reviewed and analyzed for all organizational contexts. The identified organizations were classified in terms of the sector represented, for example ‘Commercial – bank’ in order to consider other issues such as the presentation of commercial versus public sector services.

### *Coding technique*

Having identified and classified the organizations, the contexts were further coded to ascertain elements which revealed key characteristics in terms of the organizations’ ‘moral’ values. Morality is not a fixed concept. It is a social construction determined by societal perspectives. Morality recognises the distinction between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ or ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour which society deems as acceptable or unacceptable, exemplary or deplorable at a given point in time within a prescribed context. By coding organizational descriptions in setting and actions, as positive, neutral or negative, it was possible to explore perspectives on organizational morality. Table 1 provides an excerpt of the categories of codes with sample content for each taken from the plot summary coding of the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. This particular plot summary provided an example of textual description of the organization, its practices, attitudes of staff, and the effect on inmates. The codes were linked to the individual actors and the organization. Employees were seen as agents of the organization given the organizational responsibility for oversight of these persons. Coding was linked to each actor such that it was possible to review whether it was only one actor or a number demonstrating positive or negative attributes. In addition, the relationship between actors within and outside the organization was clearly mapped. The coding took account of whether the organization or actor was described with an attribute or whether it was an action undertaken which was negative or positive. This approach revealed the complex networks of positive and negative values, for example it was possible to review whether a negative action was undertaken but presented as being positive/valid in a moral context, for example killing an ‘evil’ oppressor in a conflict to liberate others.

**Table 1: Sample excerpt of coding from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* indicating negative, positive and neutral attributes of the organization and actors.**

<b>CODING CATEGORIES</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
<b>Organization in general</b> (Properties)  (Agents of institution)	Dead atmosphere  Rigid set of authoritarian rules		Authority
<b>Representatives of institution/staff</b>	Sadistic	Placid	Consistent
<b>Actions/processes</b> (Properties)	Chaotic		

(Actions on patients)	Antagonizes patient	Evaluation of patients Study	Organization of patients
(Therapies)	Lobotomizing	Group therapy session	Precise schedule
<b>Relationship with 'clients'</b>			
(General relationship)	Arch enemy (the nurse)		
(States)	Walled-in imprisonment	Self-committed	Passive
(Actions)	Denied their freedom of will	Escape	Therapeutic needs

## FINDINGS

### *Discussion: revealing the organizational moral contexts*

The selection approach provided a corpus of 24 films which were a random sample chosen based on box office success, rather than for content or viewpoint, and covering a broad chronological range from 1945 to 2015. All the films selected through this approach were fictional films. Nothing can be said about whether the organizational background contributed to the films' success, but it seems unlikely.

As with the subject content, the selection approach did not seek to assume that all genres of films would be included but the sampling did provide a broad representation of film types, as defined by Dirks (2017), with nineteen of the 33 possible genres and sub-genres included. Genre classification is, as acknowledged by the literature, not very precise, "a flexible concept, changing and evolving as films themselves change" (Geiger & Rutsky, 2005, p. 1053), and most films exhibit characteristics of more than one genre. The principal genres in this sample were: action, adventure, children's and family, comedy, crime, drama, fantasy, film noir, horror, musical, science fiction, thriller, and war. There were also examples of romance, animation and melodrama. Obvious missing categories were westerns, disaster movies, and biopics, but overall the selection of titles, although random from a content and format perspective, proved to be broadly based.

Two of the films which were selected were also the winners of 'Oscar' Academy Awards for best picture. These films were *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *The Sound of Music*. Typically, analysis of film selection by the Academy rather than the general public has been perceived to be biased in terms of the genres of films considered worthy of awards. Dirks (2017) cites that the least likely film genres to receive awards for best pictures are "[a]ction-adventures, family-oriented animation, popular 'popcorn' movies, suspense-thrillers, science-fiction, superhero films, horror, comedies (including teen comedies), Westerns, foreign-language films, spy thrillers and children's films". Many of the films in the corpus did reflect these categorisations and therefore it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority were not Academy Award winners. The selection intentionally sought to reflect on the reception of the general public in order to ensure a good outcome for approaching a wider public understanding of organizations.

All the films either displayed some sense of organizational context, or mentioned specific kinds of organization in the plot summary. This highlights the place of organizations in supporting and influencing society’s daily existence, interactions and preoccupations. The only film not to have a clear organizational context was *Toy Story*, an animated children’s film about the relationships and activities of the toys’ imagined life. However, even this had some mention of organizations in the narrative (a bank and a restaurant). The contexts identified were wide ranging. Twelve high level organizational contexts were revealed:

- Anti-Government Movements
- Armed Forces
- Commerce
- Competition
- Criminal
- Education
- Government
- Health
- Law enforcement
- Religious
- Science
- Tourism/Recreation

These contexts could be further broken down (see Table 2). Except for the categories of ‘crime’ and ‘war’, there were no particular associations between the genre and the organizational contexts. If the selection criteria had resulted in some film choices more specific of the missing sub-genres, such as ‘detective’ or ‘courtroom drama’, these might have displayed such links. Otherwise, the analysis shows that there is no necessary correspondence between the generally accepted genres of film and the kind of organizational context and content.

The organizations covered were diverse in nature, although there was a strong trend towards public sector organizations: government, armed forces, the police and justice systems, prison and penal services and hospitals and health services. These are contexts which are well understood across all sections of society. In contrast to this, a significant proportion of the films featured anti-social groups: criminal organizations and terrorism. When an organization or group were challenging the status quo of government, it was made clear whether the group were perceived to be ‘freedom fighters’ or ‘terrorists’ and thus the status as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ was demarked. The coding revealed that these groups of organizations were the most likely to be considered strongly positive or negative from an ethical perspective within a given film.

Other well represented areas were: religion, science, tourism, recreation and entertainment, education, sport, and commercial institutions such as banks. Although they are undoubtedly the background to many films, in this particular sample there were no instances of cultural institutions such as libraries, archives or museums.

**Table 2: Corpus of films analyzed for organizational contexts**

Year	Ranking by highest	Film title and ranking	Organizational contexts
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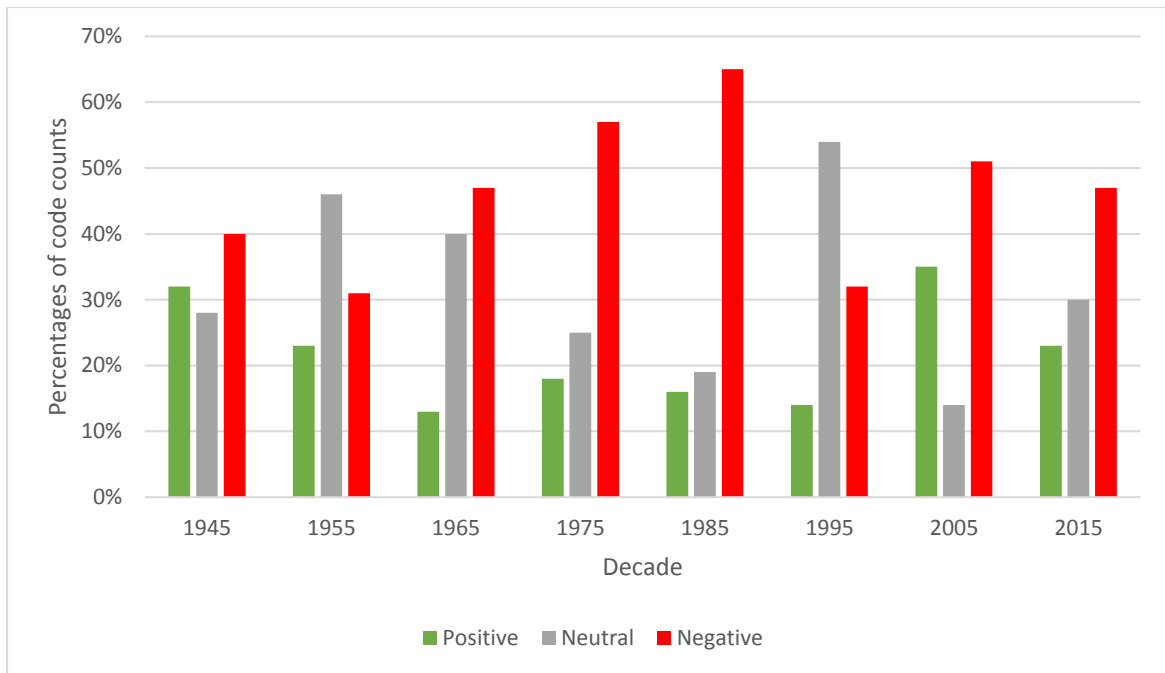
	<b>grossing at the box office</b>		
2015	1	Star Wars: The Force Awakens	Anti-Government movement – resistance movement Armed forces – army and air/space forces Government – Imperial dictatorship Religious – Jedi
	2	Jurassic World	Armed forces – army and air forces Commercial - entertainment industry
	3	Furious 7	Competition – car racing Criminal syndicate Government – secret services Law enforcement - penal system - prison
2005	1	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Anti-Government movement - counter extremists – death eaters Competition - sport Educational – boarding schooling - domestic and international – private and state – mixed and single sex Government – civil service Law enforcement - court
	2	Star Wars Episode III - the Revenge of the Sith	Armed forces – army and air/space forces – Clone Army Armed forces – army and air/space forces – Separatist Droid Army Government – Federation Government – Republic Health service – maternity unit Religious – Jedi Religious - Sith
	3	The Chronicles of Narnia – the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe	Armed forces – army forces Government – monarchy – usurper Government – monarchy - rightful Law enforcement – secret police Religious – dark magic Religious – deep magic - Christian
1995	1	Toy Story	Commercial – bank Recreational – restaurant Research/Science – space exploration
	2	Die Hard: with a vengeance	Anti-Government movement - terrorism Commercial - banking Commercial - retail Criminal syndicate Law enforcement – police Transport – subway
	3	Apollo 13	Government - political Research/Science – NASA
1985	1	Back to the Future	Educational – school
	2	Rambo: First Blood Part II	Armed forces – army and air forces Government Law enforcement – Vietnam POW camp
	3	Rocky IV	Competition – boxing
1975	1	Jaws	Law enforcement – police Safety – coastguard Tourism/recreation Government – local government
	2	The Rocky Horror Show	Religious



			Research/Science
	3	One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest	Health service – psychiatric hospital
1965	1	The Sound of Music*	Armed forces – army and naval forces Competition – music Education – private governess Government – Nazi Religious – Christian – Catholic convent
	2	Doctor Zhivago	Armed forces – army Educational – medical school Government - Bolsheviks Health service – military field hospital Law enforcement - penal system – labor camps
	3	Thunderball	Armed forces – naval Criminal syndicate Coast guards Government – secret services Health service – private clinic Government – international - NATO
1955	1	Cinerama Holiday	Tourism/recreation
	2	Mister Roberts	Armed forces – naval forces Law enforcement – military police
	3	Battle Cry	Armed forces – army and naval forces
1945	1	The Bells' of St Mary	School - convent Health service - medicine – general practice Religion – Christian Commerce – independent businessman
	2	Spellbound	Health service – psychiatric hospital Law enforcement – police Tourism/recreation – skiing Transport - train
	3	Leave Her to Heaven	Health service - hospital Law enforcement – court Law enforcement – prison Transport - train

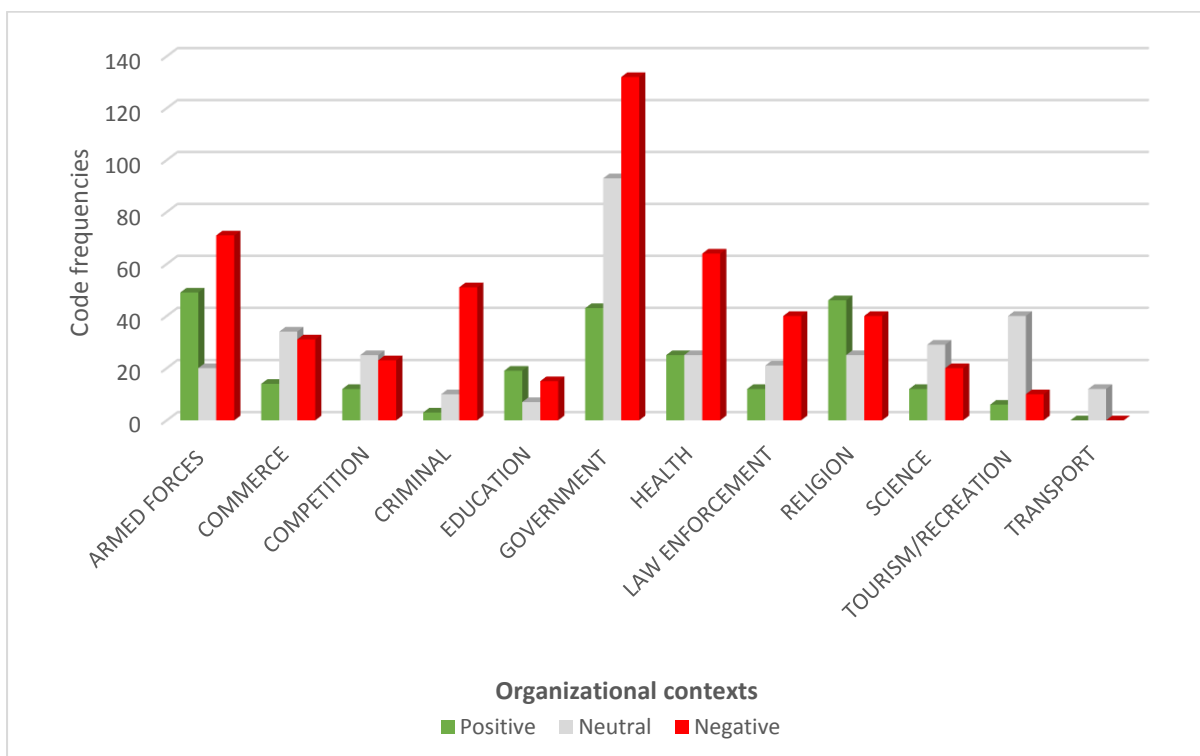
*Discussion: revealing the moral stance of organizations*

The coding further revealed the complexity of the organization position within the narrative. Figure 1 provides an overview of the percentages of total positive, neutral and negative frequency code counts from across the decades. An analysis by decade revealed that throughout the decades there has been a sophisticated understanding and presentation of the role of the organization and the agents therein from the 1940s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Throughout the film contexts overall the organizations, or their agents, were more frequently coded negatively rather than positively. This may be due to the exaggeration of organizational characteristics for dramatic effect. Nevertheless, this demonstrates that whilst individuals may in everyday life perceive an organization as an agent for 'good' they nevertheless buy into fictional narratives where the organization is complex, not to be trusted, or at worst overtly evil.



**Fig. 1: Percentages of code counts for total positive, neutral and negative organizational attributes across the decades.**

Figure 2 provides an overview of the coding revealing the extent to which organizations were coded with positive, neutral or negative attributes. It is to be noted that the length of the synopses, and the number of evaluative codes varies considerably, from 12 for transport and 268 for government. This highlights the centrality of certain organizations to the plotline and the significance of these organizations to public perceptions. Given that films require action and conflict it is perhaps unsurprising that government organizations are central to the plot in such a high number of films.



**Fig. 2: Coding frequency for positive, neutral and negative organizational attributes.**

Focusing on the organizational contexts more specifically, the only context which featured in multiple films and was always negatively described was the Nazi regime. Apart from this one focus, the ethical view of each sector was not uniform, and the organizations were likely to have both positive and negative attributes in different narratives. This was also the case in the same narrative. For instance, *Star Wars III* provides a complex organizational landscape overtly stating in its narration that “evil is everywhere. There is good and bad on both sides”. This is reflected within the coding although the Jedi are described with positive language in most instances. In the case of the Sith, it is recognised that even the dark side can be an agency for good as evidenced by the narration of the acts of Darth Plagueis the Wise, who used his ‘dark powers’ to save people from death.

Across the board, almost all organizations demonstrate a higher level of negative associations as opposed to positive ones. The notable exceptions were in the fields of religion and education, where positive comments slightly outweigh negative. Traditionally morality has been seen to be achieved by following rules often defined by society’s organizational pillars including church, education and state (encompassed by government and law). The former therefore align to a worldview in which religion and education deliver an exemplar capable of providing moral guidance but the state falls far short as a beacon for society in these film contexts.

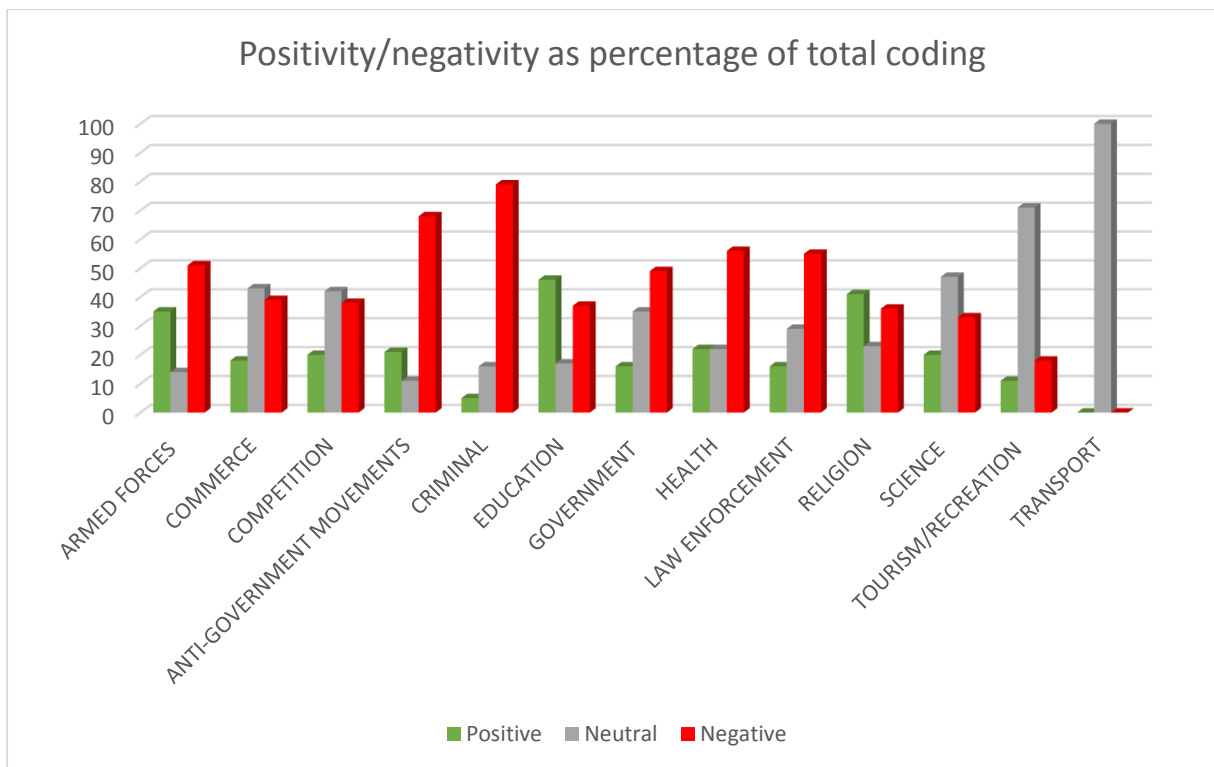
Across each of the corpus of films the delivery of education is framed as a broadly positive societal context for the backdrop of action. In each of the films, education sets a panorama of peace and thus the ‘conflict’ which arises in the film is more shocking and disrupting, interrupting the status quo of peace and safety. We see this within *Doctor Zhivago*, where the Russian Revolution provides a sharp contrast to Zhivago’s peaceful medical studies, the *Sound of Music* where the domesticity of the Von Trapp family’s home schooling is interrupted by the rise of the Nazi party and impending warfare and finally within *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* which ends with the unexpected death of a schoolchild. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, despite the shock this causes, it has nevertheless been understood that the schools involved within the narrative have actively facilitated a competition with potential dangers in contrast to providing a safeguarding environment.

In each of the fictional films with a religious element, whether the religion exists in reality (e.g. Christian) or is a part of the fantasy world (e.g. Jedi in the *Star Wars* saga), we see that religious ‘belief’, ‘faith’, ‘spirituality’ is presented as a positive force within the drama although there may be opposing ‘dark forces’ (e.g. Sith in the *Star Wars* saga or the ‘dark magic’ of the White Queen in *Narnia*). The religious context provides a vehicle for morality and positive action in the light of oppressive and immoral forces, e.g. in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in the convent in the *Sound of Music* and in the Jedi order in the *Star Wars* saga. In the *Narnia* context, the split between good and evil is far more stark and clearly presented although the plot deals with the complexity of the need to slay Aslan for forgiveness to be achieved. In the *Star Wars* saga, Yoda presents the need for isolation, "careful you must be when sensing the future, Anakin. The fear of loss is a path to the dark side...Death is a natural part of life. Rejoice for those around you who transform into the Force. Mourn them, do not. Miss them, do not. Attachment leads to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is...Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose" (*Star Wars Episode III - the Revenge of the Sith*,

2005). In other contexts, this could be determined as heartless, misguided or immoral as it requires separation from key moral values such as love, connection/society and family. However, Yoda’s persona aligns to philosophies of many real-world cultures and religions in which there is value on the place of a separate religious order or ministry. In the vision of a religion, which is presented here in *Star Wars Episode III*, Yoda is a wise, moral and positive guiding force.

The most neutral backdrops were commerce, recreation and tourism, science and transport. The transport simply delivers the actors from A to B sometimes acting as a metaphor for journey but is neutral within the contexts selected.

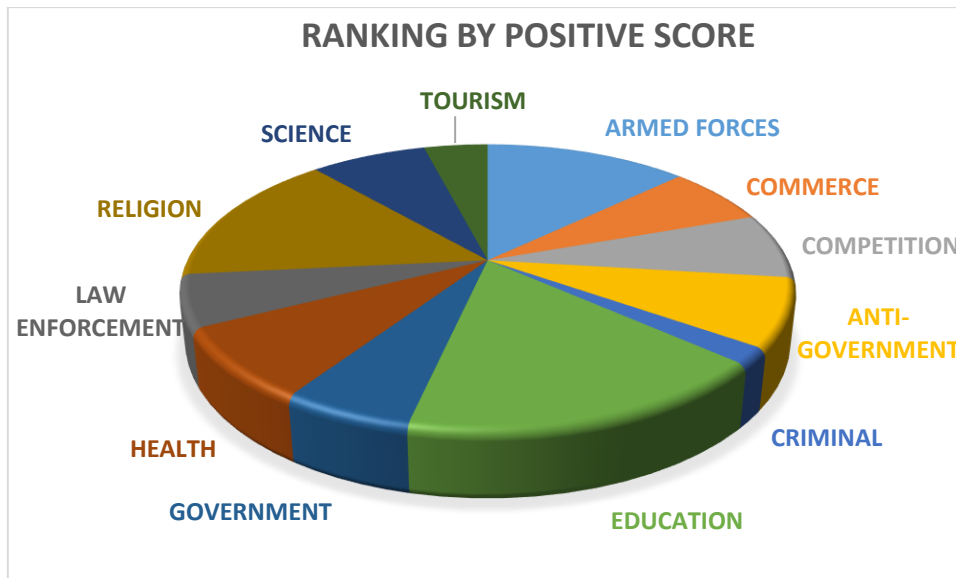
If the same coding counts are used to calculate the percentage scores for positive, neutral and negative for a given organizational context, a slightly different view of the various sectors can be displayed, in that it is flatter than that derived from the coding frequency (see Figure 3). This is also one which provides us with a basis for direct comparison of the organizational contexts.



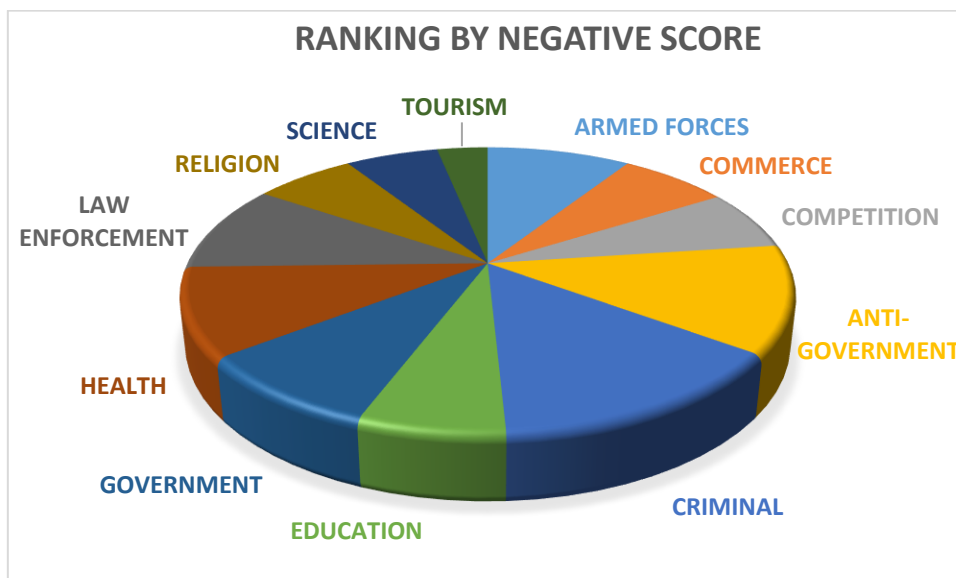
**Fig. 3: Coding percentages for positive, neutral and negative in organizational contexts**

When viewed as a percentage of the whole, government appears as 49% negative, and only 16% positive; law enforcement as 55% negative and just 16% positive. Criminal organizations, as might be expected, display the greatest negative image, with a rating of 79% although a different sample of films would have revealed examples where criminals are the heroes of the plotline. The most positively rated sectors are education (46%) and religion (41%), and if their neutral ranking is added, they are 63% and 64% ‘non-negative’ overall. An interesting feature is the high negative ranking of government institutions (49%), but also anti-government movements (68%); given the number of films that feature conflict between the two, this may be accounted for by aggressive actions. However, the only government

context which is presented entirely positively occurs in the Narnia setting when the Pevensie children are enthroned becoming a symbol of a golden age of monarchy. Law enforcement (55% negative) may have scored highly on a similar basis to the government context in that the law enforcement provides a focus for conflicting agencies. Figures 4 and 5 provide a further visualisation of the positive and negatives ratings of the various organizations.



**Fig. 4: Organizational contexts ranked by their positive percentage score**



**Fig. 5: Organizational contexts ranked by their negative percentage score**

The one set of coding which is skewed by a single film is within the health context. Interestingly in all three of the films selected from 1945, there is a health service dimension to the plotline. Within this context of the delivery of health services, we see the expectation that the health and medical setting provides a vehicle to address and improve conditions for the actors within the piece. For example, within the *Lost Weekend* the main protagonist will

surely be cured of alcoholism once properly treated. In the 1975 film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the intention is to shock the audience with a health context which is entirely immoral in the actions and services delivered to those within its care. It is notable that this received an Academy Award for shedding light on the dangers of acceptance that the medical/health service is always a positive social force albeit that within the other six contexts the health service is largely positive. No other set of coding was skewed by a single film which is revealing in terms of presenting a consistency of perspectives from across the film corpus.

In many cases the ethical dimension of an organization arises from a conflict between different agencies in the film's narrative: 'goodies' and 'baddies'. These do not always align in an expected way. For example, the overall negative view of the hospital in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is delivered through a conflict where the staff are the 'baddies' and the patients, led by a convicted felon, are the 'goodies'. In the *Rambo* film, it is the 'maverick' USA individuals who act as an agency for good in opposition to government employees.

This demonstrates that the ethical values of the organization are often manifested through its representatives and their behaviour, rather than direct value judgements of the organization per se. In the case of both *Jaws* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, much of the negative ethical assessment of the organization is expressed through the description of its personnel. The very close association between the image of an institution and that of its human agents is generally recognized and indeed the character of Nurse Ratched from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, is synonymous with this perspective:

“[a] cold, heartless tyrant, Nurse Ratched ... has also become a popular metaphor for the corrupting influence of power and authority in bureaucracies such as the mental institution in which the novel is set” (Wikipedia, 2017).

As none of the sample films has the organization as a main theme (as opposed to background) this reliance on the characters to convey ethical standing might be expected. *Harry Potter*, for example, although set in a school, is not specifically about education, but about magic and the opposing forces of good and evil.

As with organizations, individuals can exhibit both positive and negative characteristics. The villain of the piece, such as the tyrannical Captain Morton in *Mr Roberts*, may have redeeming features, and the forces of good, such as Captain Brody in *Jaws*, 'the real hero of the piece', is 'uptight', 'troubled' and 'flustered', while the astronauts in *Apollo 13* 'make errors'. Changing attitudes to personal conduct can also affect ethical standing, as the perception of character and what constitutes good or bad behaviour may vary over time; for example, James Bond appears somewhat sinister and disconnected in the 1965 production of *Thunderball*, and this contributes to a largely neutral or negative depiction of the British secret services. However, this portrayal aligns to criticism of the role and place of spying in a moral world. Joseph Conrad's (1907) secret agent text has been quoted on numerous occasions to make this point including amongst others by the filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, "In principle, I should lay it down that the existence of secret agents should not be tolerated, as tending to augment the positive dangers of the evil against which they are used" (Britton, 2005, p.1). Bond has been analysed as having come to epitomise the film spy genre although his persona is seen to have evolved through various manifestations during the twentieth century (Miller, 2008). Spies, by their nature remain unknown to normal society, but have

been increasingly glamorised through film. One would hope that this depiction does not align to reality. For example, in a number of ‘Bond films’, James Bond is able to ‘go rogue’ throughout the film and his actions are largely ignored by his superiors (Elhefnawy, 2015). One would hope that this does not reflect reality. Likewise, in real-life, Nurse Ratched’s employers, in a modern health service would doubtless have more to say about her bullying behaviour than is the case in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Nevertheless, the public do ‘buy in’ to these depictions as plausible in the plotline.

## CONCLUSIONS

This approach exposed the film makers symbolic placing of the organization in order to provide backdrops for the narrative. The plot analysis revealed that throughout the decades there has been a sophisticated portrayal in film of the role of the organization and the agents therein. Individual organizational contexts within the films displayed a mixture of negative, neutral and positive evaluations, usually with no distinctly positive or negative impression of a particular sector. The general trend was towards a negative view of organizations, with only education and religion showing an overall positive assessment. In part this may be due to the exaggeration of institutional attributes for the purpose of dramatic effect, and to support conflict between opposing agencies in the narrative. This panorama is in contrast to real-life ideals where there has been an emphasis on organizational standards and ‘corporate governance’ delivering ethical exemplars. The film contexts highlight the complexities of delivering trusted organizations. The reality that there remains the potential for organizational corruption is evidently well understood by the general public and clearly depicted within the film world. Admittedly films are a mechanism for escapism but they must nevertheless engage audiences in a plot which is sufficiently understandable and relatable in terms of contextual settings. Windsor (2014) explores the value of providing exemplars in real-life settings. We do not see many organizational exemplars in the film world. Only the monarchy delivered by the Pevensie children within *The Chronicles of Narnia* is entirely positive and this is not a transferable organizational context. The remaining film contexts rather present the complexities of delivering trusted organizations. They act as modern day morality plays highlighting potential dangers and the need to be vigilant lest the Nurse Ratched of this world are not recognised and challenged. The need for ‘story’ to deliver messages into real-world settings is discussed in a number of chapters in Schwartz and Harris’ (2014) volume of fiction and organizational contexts. In line with this the negative plotlines can be seen as significant vehicles for providing societal warning and learning.

Further work in this area would help to confirm or contradict the findings of this exercise. In particular, a change in the selection criteria would demonstrate if the same phenomena are evident in the case of critically acclaimed films as opposed to those popularly regarded. Had the selection included Academy Award winners then the 2015 film *Spotlight* would have evidenced a portrayal of a real-life struggle to reveal the abuse of children in the USA by Catholic priests who were seen as moral exemplars before their public exposure. An alternative approach would be to analyze films with organizational thematic content, although this could be considered indicative of the industry’s view of organizations, rather than the public perception. Although the twenty-first century citizen may be more challenging of authority and authoritative systems, the belief that personal interpretations of moral conduct are subject to change needs to be more robustly tested through a longitudinal study involving

contemporaneous narrative descriptions. Because of the difficulty of locating such material, this would necessarily be the subject of a separate investigation.

The close association between an organization and its representatives, and the way in which they are its discernible face, was evident in the coding; references to the ethical position of the institution per se were relatively low. It is striking that most existing studies of thematic topics in film focus on persons, or categories of persons. These categories tend to be distinguished by personal characteristics, and it is possible that an alternative analysis of occupational groups in film would be helpful in elucidating the understanding of their organizational contexts. However, this chapter reveals the possibility of using this approach in new ways to further develop a greater understanding of populist portrayals of organizations.

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