

Film studies (c)

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Machuca and Malena Bombing, broken buildings, ruined towns, etc...these are the typical images one would normally imagine when thinking about war. Armed soldiers on the street, children who have lost their parents, survivors who wail beside the bodies of their families that are already cold...the people's lives have completely been robbed. That is the first image about war in most people's minds. However, they, especially children, don't really know that there is a serious underlying reason for war. It is not easily explained why war exists and who leads it. It is apparent that historically many wars have been caused due to conflicts regarding political ideologies. It is not difficult to discover that hidden evils inside of humans are exposed during these ideological issues. People are born with personality traits such as selfishness, jealousy, and brutality. In spite of themselves or instinctively, people express these characteristics in self defense. The films Machuca and Malena describe these human evils in severe situations like war and political conflicts. In addition, these films have a common theme in that they show them through the child's point of view. The following essay focuses on how people act in an unstable society such as in war or coups and how the children feel and regard such situations. This is shown by the directors as they reveal the story through these two movies.

Both of the films, Machuca and Malena, have the common background of war. Andres Wood, the director of Machuca, and Giuseppe Tornatore, the director of Malena, chose the historical background of war to express the evil side of humankind. In the films, human evil is expressed instinctively in difficulties or severe situations and portrayed through the backdrop of Chile in 1973 and World WarII. In 1973, Allende's government in Chile won the

general election, but was soon collapsed by the coup d'état of Pinochet and capitalism. (Encyclopedia) Capitalism and socialism were head to head against each other. The conflict between people who had vested rights and those who did not was accelerating; the gap between the rich and poor was growing larger. Therefore, the conflict between these two classes was naturally increasing. Wood shows the reality of Chile through Gonzalo and Machuca. Gonzalo represents the wealth of capitalism, while Machuca from the shanty town represents the failure of the realization of socialism. On the other hand, Tornatore depicts Italy in World War II. The town is extremely unsettled because of the German military presence. Missiles are attacking and fighters are visible. Tornatore depicts the ugly side of human nature through a beautiful woman “ Malena”.

The time period and settings of the two films are different, but there is a similarity in human traits, such as scorn and selfishness, which are exposed under the common denominator of war. Audiences could look at the ugly instincts inside humans who have accrued wealth through capitalism and despise the poor in Machuca. In Malena, these human instincts are displayed through jealousy and hatred toward Malena by women whose husbands are mesmerized by her charm and beauty.

In both movies, the directors make the point that it is not only the characters in the films who are selfish and try to protect only what they own, but, in reality, it is also the audiences themselves. Capitalists who do not care about others defend what they own in Machuca. In Malena witch-hunting takes place by women who know it is their husbands' fault, but choose not to accept this and harbor jealousy toward a woman who is better than they are.

Both Wood and Tornatore suggest that people should take a good look at themselves, whether they are people who just forgot or pretend to have forgotten about humanism, which may be the most valuable trait in life. Machuca and Malena follow the child's point of view. Just like normal image of children, the children in these films symbolize purity and the spotless mind. The character of Gonzalo gives his things to his friend, Machuca, who is teased in school, and the character of Renato who likes Malena purely and trusts her depict the child's point of view. The directors communicate a message of the ugly human nature by using the contrast between these two children and the adults who are absorbed in raw self-interest.

However, Gonzalo and Machuca are still little boys who have no power. They cannot protect the people whom they want to defend from society. This is shown through Gonzalo, who can't protect his friend who is despised by a society gone wrong, and Renato, who cannot do anything for a woman he likes; human evil, which has always existed, is not easily changed. The directors indicate that the society has degenerated far more than the children realize. For example, in Machuca, Machuca's dad tells his son: After five years, you will clean the toilet, but Gonzalo will go to college. After ten years, you will clean the toilet, but Gonzalo will go to college. After 15 years, you will still clean the toilet, but your friend will own his dad's company. (Machuca)

Machuca's dad portrays the resentment about the society, which has gone wrong and is not going to change regardless how hard he tries. Also, Tornatore shows the powerlessness of Renato who always watches Malena secretly.

The reason why these two movies appeal to audiences and make them feel that the sentiments are accurate is because the two main characters, Gonzalo and Renato, bow to the society. These films are different from other hero movies; they show weak individuals in society and let the audience sympathize with them and feel pity. In film, Gonzalo is described as a person who keeps his own belief that all people are equal. Renato is described as a person who trusts Malena who is the subject of scorn from the women in town and the only sexual object for men. However, the directors show someone who becomes a victim of violence of our society through these two characters. Gonzalo who watches the death of his friend's mother and finally cries out, " Look at me carefully." He leaves there with tearful eyes. What he sees is the instinct, the mortal terror the society provokes. When Malena changes her hair color and lights a cigarette at outdoor café, the director asks the audience if they are the men who give a light for Malena or other women in town.

Another reason these films appeal to audiences is that the directors remind them of the time they also had pure minds like Gonzalo and Renato, as compared to the picture of what they are now—dirty and degraded.

Everyone was once a child who believed what they saw and acted on their beliefs. As they matured, they became men and women who shut their eyes to the injustices of the world for their own self-interest and became people who were afraid of standing up for what they believed for fear that they might lose what they had. The directors depict these sentiments, which, in reality, is showing a picture of the audiences themselves.

A humorous commonality exists between Machuca and Malena, which

audiences might not notice. Wood and Tornatore give some hints about what these two films are about through the names of the characters, which are the same as the titles of the movies. The origin of Machuca is Mapuche, the natives Chile. (Encyclopedia) As audiences can see in the film, Machuca has a swarthy complexion, but Gonzalo looks white. The director uses these two different faces to give a hint that they cannot be friends with each other. In addition, Wood points out indirectly that the USA supported the military coup d'état in 1973 Chile. He describes the gloomy picture of natives in Chile at that time through Machuca who is pushed back by foreign intervention.

On the other hand, the origin of Malena is Magdalena who is one of Jesus' most celebrated disciples in the Bible. There are many rumors surrounding her life. For example, one is that she suffered from seven demons and was exorcised by Jesus; another is that she was a prostitute, and after meeting with Jesus, she did repent her sins. Some people insist that the latter record is manipulated, because she was increasingly scorned by many ministries in church which was male centric at that time. But finally, Pope John Paul II exalted her to the apostle of apostles in 1988. (Encyclopedia) The records of Magdalena are very similar with the picture of Malena in Tornatore's film: seven demons, women in town, male ministries, men in town, Jesus, Renato and Malena. The director shows that the characters in Malena are deeply connected with Magdalena. That is why Tornatore chose Italy for the location of his film; it was not only that he is Italian.

These two films show the people cracking under the society, and the directors show the picture of the gloomy society in which people now live. Nevertheless, the directors suggest hope through Machuca and Malena,

which arouses sympathy from audiences. Wood shows in a scene that Machuca applauds the priest who is removed with the collapse of Allende's government. The audience could get a vicarious satisfaction from the bravery of Machuca, because they know that his actions are courageous and that he is still a little boy. The director allows the audience to look at themselves. Meanwhile, Tornatore depicts a scene in which Malena returns to the town. One of women who had despised and scorned her before said to Malena " Bonjour, Madam Scordia," to which she responded, " Bonjour." The director shows that her bravery finally made the people accept her and transcends the hardships, just as in the case of Magdalena. Actually, there is a scene in which Malena dresses up as Magdalena in the middle of film. At the end of the film, Renato says to Malena, " Good luck, Mrs. Scordia..." This is not only to Malena, but also, what Tornatore wants to tell his audience. He suggests that people should live as Malena who never goes against immoral society. The meaning of " good luck" is not only coming from Renato, but the director is asking people to please stop doing evil deeds such as witch-hunting.

Neither films comment on war directly. In fact both films say a lot about impact of war in daily lives of common innocent people in the society. Reconstruction of the society is always preceded by destruction of the society. War is destructive for a society on various levels. The violence is happening everywhere in the film. It is at the background. In the film Machuca even if there is not direct portrayal of civil war, it shadows life of everybody in the film. In Malena violence is both mental and physical. The torture Malena has to put up with while struggling to be alone and surviving

in the film is high level mental torture. The actual physical violence of witch hunting happens much later in the film. The film in fact slowly builds the hostility and mental violence in the story, so much so that the audience expects the physical violence to happen to Malena anyways. The evil around the society points fingers at Malena, the upper class society is deliberately turning blind eye to the people who want to give good education to their children irrespective of coming from shanty towns in Machuca. Very conveniently the military in Machuca crushes the people in shanty towns thinking these are the ones to start the civil war. The upper class gets away because of money, status and positions. These evil class conflicts are depicted clearly in Machuca and in fact these class differences are highlighted when Gonzalo says, “ Look at me carefully, I don’t belong here”. In Malena, Renato and his friends play the games and talk about sex constantly. Later Renato takes on himself of following Malena everywhere. He becomes a stalker and that becomes his pastime. He forgets the world and the war as he fascinated and obsessed by sexual fantasies of Malena. In Machuca, both boys and Silvana find their own games while selling flags for workers across the political factions. They jump with the protestors, go for movies and even try kissing the girl alternatively. The school doesn’t allow them to do much as it is in itself restrictive and intimidating. They find their own world by creating games with each other and spending as much time as possible with each other.

Both films take a cross section view of various attributes such as courage, compassion, beauty in human beings. When the town turns its back on her, Malena has left with no choice than to get into prostitution to survive.

Women across generations and continents have proven to be survivors and Malena is no different. The decision to leave her domesticity and step out as a prostitute is by no means easy for her. She takes life the way it comes and yet at the same time the director is successful in conveying that it is under forced circumstances she is doing this. When Malena comes back to the town with her husband after all the atrocities the town has committed, the town admits and appreciates the courage and restraint she has shown. To top it all she is civil to the ladies who have almost beaten her to death out of jealousy and thinking she is a witch. Machuca and Silvana have always stood by Gonzalo be it school, in riots or otherwise, they treat him as equal and consider it their duty as friends to stand by him, Gonzalo on the other hand turns his back on his friends when they need him the most. It happens twice in the film. Machuca stands for Gonzalo in front of his own father while Gonzalo doesn't say a word to his mother when she abuses Silvana. He in fact hides out in public so that he is not seen by his mother. He is basically a shy non-aggressive boy who prefers to go in a shell rather than reacting strongly. Even then the audience is not able to forgive him when he uses his upper class as a passport to get away when his friends need him the most. Malena has incurred the wrath of the ladies in the town because she is extremely beautiful. In her later years when she returns to the town the ladies claim that she is not that breathtakingly beautiful anymore as she has developed lines around her eyes and she has also lost her shape and figure. The director comments on concept of vanity of beauty the ladies of the town have through this interaction. The real beauty of Malena lies in the fact that she is courageous, she is extremely loyal to her husband and that's the only

relationship that matters to her. She is aware that the men in the town leer at her, but she doesn't pay any attention knowing her duties very well. The ladies comment on her appearance in the last scene only to indicate that they have finally admitted defeat to the beauty that lies within her and not her face.

Machuca and Silvana are compassionate to Gonzalo who appreciates their warmth. They understand his problems and stand by him whenever required. The affection which he expects from his family is in fact fulfilled by his friends. His parents are certainly not accepting that the local boys should get education with their children in the high end school. When Machuca's mother tries to explain her desire of seeing her son in the best school, one particular parent from upper class tells her to go somewhere else with the bitterness she has. This lack of compassion and understanding hits the audience with great force. Renato in Malena is a considerate and compassionate fellow. As he has been watching Malena closely he understands the woman beneath the façade of tough exterior she displays. He understands the pain she has gone through because of the torture she is subjected to. He feels every bit strongly for her and hence helps her husband to find her in Messina.

Both the films appeal adult and children of all ages. The innocence of the children comes out brilliantly in both the films. However coming of age children have a different psychology. Hence these films actually make an appeal to adults to understand the perspective of these children and their world. The war in the background makes the worst come out of people. The audience is not able take it so bluntly. Hence the movies appeal to all classes and all levels of intellectuals.

Story is told in a movie with the help of lot of help. One such significant constituent of a film is its music. In Machuca, music comes and goes very subtly but in Malena music plays havoc in the mind of the viewer. Not only it is enchanting but it compliments every frame of the film. The camera work or cinematography in Malena is extremely graceful. The most captivating close up is numerous hands proffering to light Malena's cigarette when she sits at the roadside bistro as a prostitute for the first time. The disgust in her eyes is clearly seen and although the faces of the men surrounding her and waiting to pounce on her are not seen their outstretched hands convey their intentions very clearly. Irrespective of Monica Bellucci's beauty the viewer sees what the cinematography has to show as intentions of the people on the screen. That makes this particular scene a great scene in terms of cinematography. The camera speaks and carries forward the story in Malena but is bland in Machuca.

In conclusion, both films are basically connected to an unstable society, and the directors try to show how cruel and ugly humans can be in protecting themselves. They show the brutality of human instinct. Both directors emphasize humanism through their main characters who represent opposition to wrong social and political ideas and usage.

Societies throughout the world have social, economic, and cultural problems caused by their ideologies. Furthermore, many people try to go against these ideologies by adopting diverse methods such as mass communication.

Because of these reasons, film could become one of the most effective implements to social reform. Films with revolutionary ideas against societal structure have to be illuminated by many more people to create the

existence of equality and dignity in human beings. Gonzalo, Machuca and Renato are brave boys needed by society, because they maintain their own beliefs against the popular conventions while most people do not. This refers to how most people regard a person who has a particular quality such as trust, morality, justice and goodness when they face a situation.

What people leave these two films feeling is “humanity.” It is not about which is better—capitalism or socialism. In the world, the foremost concern of people should be humanity. That is what Woods and Tornatore try to tell people from these films. If there are people who are ostracized and hurt from political ideologies, we should re-think our ideological beliefs and base them on more humanitarian grounds. Only then the society will survive with more passion and heartfelt kindness

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