

The Role of Cinema in Geopolitics: Case Studies from a Selection of International Films

Noureddine Bensoula 

Abstract. *This paper explores the strategic role of cinema in geopolitics, emphasizing how films function as instruments of soft power to shape global perceptions, promote national values, and influence international relations. By adopting a qualitative, comparative approach, the research examines a purposive sample of films from five national cinemas “American, Chinese, Russian, Indian, and Middle Eastern” selected for their international visibility, critical acclaim, and geopolitical relevance. The analysis demonstrates how cinematic narratives, character portrayals, and production strategies reflect national identities, reinforce political ideologies, and advance cultural diplomacy. Key examples include Hollywood productions such as Rocky IV and Black Panther, Chinese films like Operation Red Sea and The Wandering Earth, Russian films including The Last Warrior and Sputnik, Indian films such as RRR and Dangal, and Middle Eastern films like The Salesman and Capernaum. The findings highlight the transformative potential of cinema as a tool of soft power, capable of both projecting influence and shaping international discourse, while underscoring the economic, cultural, and political dimensions that underpin global film production. This study contributes to the understanding of media as a geopolitical instrument and provides insights into the interplay between culture, politics, and international power dynamics.*

Keywords: *soft power, geopolitics, cinema, movie poles*

University of Mascara, Algeria

E-mail: noredline.benssoula@univ-mascara.dz

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Geosiyasətdə kinonun rolu: Beynəlxalq filmlərin seçilməsindən keyfiyyət araşdırmaları

Noureddine Bensoula 

Xülasə. *Bu məqalədə kinonun geosiyasətdə strateji rolu araşdırılır, filmlərin global qavrayışları formalaşdırmaq, milli dəyərləri təşviq etmək və beynəlxalq münasibətlərə təsir göstərmək üçün yumşaq güc alətləri kimi necə fəaliyyət göstərdiyi vurğulanır. Keyfiyyətli, müqayisəli yanaşma tətbiq etməklə, tədqiqat beynəlxalq görünürsüzlüyü, tənqidi bəyənmə və geosiyasi aktuallığı ilə seçilən beş milli kinoteatrdan “Amerika, Çin, Rusiya, Hindistan və Yaxın Şərq” filmlərinin məqsədyönlü nümunəsi araşdırılır. Təhlil kinematoqrafik hekayələrin, personaj təsvirlərinin və istehsal strategiyalarının milli kimlikləri necə əks etdirdiyini, siyasi ideologiyaları necə gücləndirdiyini və mədəni diplomatiyanı necə inkişaf etdirdiyini nümayiş etdirir.*

Əsas nümunələrə Rokki IV və Qara Pantera kimi Hollivud istehsalı, Qırmızı Dəniz Əməliyyatı və Gəzən Yer kimi Çin filmləri, Son Döyüşçü və Sputnik kimi Rusiya filmləri, RRR və Dangal kimi Hindistan filmləri və Satıcı və Kapernaum kimi Yaxın Şərq filmləri daxildir. Bu tapıntılar, kinonun həm təsir göstərmək, həm də beynəlxalq diskursu formalaşdırmaq qabiliyyətinə malik yumşaq güc aləti kimi transformativ potensialını vurğulayır, eyni zamanda global film istehsalının əsasını təşkil edən iqtisadi, mədəni və siyasi ölçüləri vurğulayır. Bu tədqiqat medianın geosiyasi alət kimi başa düşülməsinə töhfə verir və mədəniyyət, siyasət və beynəlxalq güc dinamikası arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqəyə dair fikirlər təqdim edir.

Açar sözlər: yumşaq güc, geosiyasət, kino, film qütbləri

Tuş Universiteti, Əlcəzair

E-poçt: noredine.benssoula@univ-mascara.dz

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Introduction

Through this scholarly paper, we seek to examine the complex relationship between geopolitics and cinema as one of the most prominent instruments of soft power in the contemporary era. In light of the rapid transformations shaping the world and the growing significance of cultural and media industries, cinema is no longer merely a form of entertainment; rather, it has become a strategic tool capable of conveying political messages, shaping collective imaginaries, and influencing how societies perceive international realities.

This study focuses on analyzing how cinema contributes to constructing representations of identities and geopolitical spaces. Films, through their symbolic content and visual narratives, often reflect the ideological orientations of producing countries and play an active role in shaping public opinion at both local and global levels. Through narrative structures, character development, and the use of symbolism, cinema participates in reproducing national images, legitimizing policies, and even influencing the prioritization of geopolitical agendas among audiences.

Research

Although soft power is generally defined as the ability to influence and persuade through intangible resources such as culture, values, and institutions, the relationship between these resources and the formation of public opinion has not received sufficient attention in academic research, particularly within the Arab context. Most studies have focused on traditional forms of power while neglecting cultural and media dimensions.

From this perspective, this paper aims to bridge this knowledge gap by adopting cinema as an analytical framework for examining the manifestations of soft power. This is achieved through the analysis of selected international films from diverse geopolitical contexts, with the objective of revealing how cinematic narratives function as instruments of influence that contribute to reshaping symbolic power relations and directing collective consciousness across borders.

Literature Review

Returning to Friedrich Ratzel's work *The Laws of Spatial Growth of States* (1901), he formulated seven laws of territorial expansion, the first of which emphasizes culture: "The size of the state grows in proportion to the development of its culture." Ratzel's expansionist principles have since informed geopolitical practice, initially in Western contexts and increasingly in non-Western settings, with countries such as Turkey seeking to project geopolitical influence through cultural production, notably television series that reimagine Ottoman and Turkish national identity (Zoran Milošević, 2024). The intersection of cinema and politics can similarly be understood through the lens of cultural influence and Americanization in the aftermath of World War II, a transformation conceptualized by Joseph Nye as "soft power," whereby language, culture, and media become strategic instruments shaping global politics and economic interactions. Historically, Western culture influenced regions such as Eastern Europe even before NATO expansion, echoing neo-colonial patterns in Africa and America where cultural penetration precedes political domination. In this regard, films function as a potent medium for reaching broad audiences, disseminating cultural values globally, and embodying soft power (Guan, Chagas-Bastos, & Nishijima, 2023). As a result, films and television series have become highly effective tools of influence, particularly given the dominance of the United States in global media production, explaining the frequent scholarly focus on American cinema. Major U.S. companies, including Walt Disney, Warner Bros., Universal, Columbia, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, Sony, DreamWorks, Miramax, and Lionsgate, dominate the international market, with 66% of European film sales, 50% of Video on Demand content, and 45% of European television programming consisting of American productions (Zoran Milošević, 2024).

Beyond market dominance, cinema represents a significant economic and cultural force: in 2018, Hollywood generated approximately \$40 billion in revenue, with total profits reaching \$56.8 billion, underscoring its role in projecting soft power globally and creating geopolitical impact through narratives and messages. However, film distribution and marketing can also provoke international tensions, as seen with *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig), which faced bans in Algeria and Kuwait, censorship calls in Lebanon, and accusations in China of promoting Western propaganda and gender conflict. Despite the growth of other film industries, including Bollywood, which produces around 1,600 films annually, and Nollywood, with its large domestic output, Hollywood remains the leading global film producer with extensive international reach. Cinema thus plays a crucial role in shaping the global geopolitical landscape, as Hollywood increasingly adapts to emerging markets such as China, altering narratives and incorporating culturally relevant elements to maintain access and influence (Thuc, 2023). Central to this discussion is the concept of soft power, defined as a nation's ability to influence others through non-coercive means, including culture, values, and ideology, as opposed to hard power which relies on military or economic coercion. According to Nye, soft power operates through diplomacy, cultural exchange, and development assistance and can be measured through indicators such as international student enrollment, global media consumption, and academic exchange (Guan, Chagas-Bastos, & Nishijima, 2023).

The United States, often perceived as a beacon of modernity with values such as openness, individualism, pluralism, and freedom, demonstrates the centrality of culture and sports in international influence, with an "attractive" foreign policy further amplifying its soft power (Aldo Matteucci, 2005). Nye's conceptualization parallels the authority of leaders derived from military success, alliances, prestige, and symbolic displays, while political capital, image, and public relations reflect everyday manifestations of soft power. Nations possess varying degrees of soft power, which may operate competitively, as between France and the United States, or in mutually reinforcing ways. One key advantage of soft power lies in its subtlety and cost-effectiveness, allowing policymakers to advance objectives without the need for substantial concessions (Aldo Matteucci, 2005).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative approach to analyze the role of cinema in geopolitics, with a particular focus on the use of film as a tool of soft power. To achieve a representative understanding of global cinematic influence, a purposive sample of films was selected from five different national cinemas (American, Chinese, Russian, Indian, and Middle Eastern) based on their international visibility, critical acclaim, and geopolitical relevance. Selection criteria included the film's ability to project national values, influence global perceptions, and contribute to cultural diplomacy. The chosen films, such as *Rocky IV* (1985) and *Black Panther* (2018) from the United States, *Operation Red Sea* (2018) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019) from China, *The Last Warrior* (2017) and *Sputnik* (2020) from Russia, *RRR* (2022) and *Dangal* (2016) from India, and *The Salesman* (2016) and *Capernaum* (2018) from the Middle East, provide a diverse lens to examine how cinema reflects national identity, promotes political narratives, and enhances soft power on the international stage. This cross-national selection allows for comparative insights into the strategies and effectiveness of film as a geopolitical tool across cultural and regional contexts.

Table 1
Selected Films and Their Geopolitical Significance

Cinema	Film Title	Year	Genre	Geopolitical / Soft Power Significance
American Cinema	Rocky IV	1985	Sports Drama	Reflects Cold War ideology, showcases American skill and diplomacy, promotes U.S. values globally (Sociology, 2024).
	Argo	2012	Historical Thriller	Highlights CIA ingenuity, U.S.-Canada cooperation, educates global audiences on U.S.-Iran relations, strengthens soft power (fpifadmin, 2012).
	The Post	2017	Historical Drama	Emphasizes free press, democratic principles, gender equality, enhances U.S. image globally ('The Post Movie Review & Film Summary', n.d.).
	Black Panther	2018	Superhero / Action	Promotes cultural representation, inspires racial and cultural empowerment, strengthens U.S. soft power (Black Panther (2018) - Intrigue - IMDb, n.d.).
Chinese Cinema	Operation Red Sea	2018	Military Action	Showcases Chinese military strength, technological advancement, global responsibility, enhances national pride and geopolitical influence (Eoin, 2018).
	The Wandering Earth	2019	Science Fiction	Promotes cooperation, technological innovation, China's cultural export, rising influence in global cinema (Brennan, 2021).
Russian Cinema	The Last Warrior	2017	Fantasy / Adventure	Showcases cultural heritage, modernizes folklore, strengthens Russia's global cultural influence (The Last Warrior (2017), n.d.).
	Sputnik	2020	Science Fiction / Horror	Highlights Soviet space legacy, scientific capabilities, enhances Russia's soft power through culture and technology ('Sputnik Movie Review & Film Summary', n.d.).

Indian Cinema	RRR	2022	Historical Action	Promotes resistance and unity, cultural export, positions India as a global cinematic and cultural force ('L'éthique au cinéma', n.d.).
	Dangal	2016	Sports Drama	Highlights gender equality, women's empowerment, global appeal, strengthens India's soft power (Satyendra Kumar Prasad & V. Santhi Siri, 2017).
Middle Eastern Cinema	The Salesman	2016	Drama	Explores morality and trauma, showcases Iranian cinematic artistry, symbol of resistance and cultural diplomacy (Wiegand, 2021).
	Capernaum	2018	Drama	Addresses child labor, refugee crises, social inequality; enhances Lebanon's soft power and humanitarian voice (Manar Hesino & Manal al-Natour, 2023).

Sources: Author, 2025

Field Framework

In the context of globalization and the rapid expansion of information technology, cinema has emerged as one of the most effective channels for communication, transmitting narratives, images, cultural values, and national identities to audiences worldwide. While Hollywood remains the dominant and most influential global film industry, emerging national cinemas have increasingly leveraged film as a strategic tool to promote their culture and identity through mass media. Prominent examples include Bollywood in India, Nollywood in Nigeria, and the co-production strategies implemented by China to expand its cinematic reach. Beyond entertainment, films now operate as instruments of geopolitical influence, enabling states to project soft power and shape global perceptions. Cinema acts as a catalyst for activating soft power dynamics, decoding cultural viewpoints, and influencing international attitudes on political, social, and economic issues. Through large-screen representations, films introduce innovative ways to engage with political debates, global challenges, and the dissemination of ideas (Pioneer, n.d.). Building on this framework, the following section presents a carefully selected sample of films that have been strategically employed by their producers to achieve specific geopolitical objectives and advance national influence on the international stage.

American Cinema:

Within the framework of analyzing the use of cinema in geopolitics, American cinema stands as a prominent model of employing film as an instrument of soft power, whereby movies contribute to shaping global perceptions, promoting national values, and reinforcing political narratives aligned with the strategic interests of the United States. Klaus Dodds argues that cinematic space provides an opportunity to convey messages about the world that only a limited number of governments are able to exploit. For this reason, Hollywood has collaborated with the Pentagon and other agencies such as the CIA to produce films that appear to support the American perspective during times of war (Morteza & Sepideh Sadat, pp. 10–35). In this context, *Rocky IV* (1985), inspired by the American rescue operation in Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis, highlights American skill and diplomacy and functions as a Cold War propaganda artifact that reflects and reinforces the ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1980s; through its character portrayals, narrative structure, and implicit messages, the film demonstrates how media can influence public perception and promote specific ideologies (Sociology, 2024). Similarly, *Argo* (2012) was employed as a tool of soft power by shaping global perceptions of the United States, strengthening alliances,

and highlighting American values, as it emphasizes the ingenuity of the CIA during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, showcases American problem-solving and creativity, and promotes collaboration between the United States and Canada during the rescue mission, thereby enhancing goodwill between the two nations; it also raises awareness of U.S.-Iran relations by situating ongoing geopolitical tensions within their historical context, and its international success, including its Academy Award win, amplified its geopolitical message (Fpifadmin, 2012). In the same vein, *The Post* (2017) highlights the role of *The Washington Post* in publishing the Pentagon Papers, underscoring the importance of a free press in holding governments accountable, reinforcing the image of the United States as a global leader in protecting individual rights, modeling resilience against governmental oppression, and addressing gender equality through its compelling narrative, while also demonstrating Hollywood's capacity to influence global perceptions and present the United States as a symbol of freedom of expression and democratic principles ('The Post Movie Review & Film Summary (2017) | Roger Ebert', n.d.). Furthermore, *Black Panther* (2018) represents a powerful instrument of soft power by illustrating the cultural influence of the United States; centered on a Black superhero with a predominantly Black cast, the film inspired movements for racial and cultural empowerment, and its global success highlighted Hollywood's ability to blend cultural authenticity with storytelling, thereby positioning the United States in alignment with progressive values and enhancing its image as a leader in representation and global cultural exchange (Black Panther, 2018).

Chinese Cinema:

The use of culture and language as a strategy in Chinese foreign policy combines the leadership's vision with the efforts of the academic community to engage with the world. This broader cultural strategy is not limited to institutional or linguistic initiatives; it also extends into media and popular culture, particularly cinema, which serves as a key vehicle for projecting national narratives and values on a global scale (Shao-Cheng, 2023). Chinese cinema demonstrates how film can function as a powerful instrument of soft power, projecting national values and strategic narratives to global audiences. *Operation Red Sea* (2018) highlights the strength and capabilities of the Chinese military, particularly the naval forces, by depicting a successful operation to rescue Chinese citizens and foreign nationals from a conflict zone in the Middle East; the film emphasizes China's growing global influence and its role as a responsible actor on the world stage, showcasing the nation's readiness to protect its citizens abroad, while also demonstrating technological and military advancements, reinforcing national pride and increasing geopolitical influence. Through its thrilling narrative, the film shapes perceptions of China as a global leader capable of safeguarding its interests and supporting international stability (Eoin, 2018). Similarly, *The Wandering Earth* (2019), a Chinese science fiction film, illustrates China's rising influence in global cinema and soft power by imagining a future in which humanity unites to move the Earth away from an expanding Sun, highlighting collective efforts, particularly China's, in addressing a global crisis; by emphasizing themes of cooperation, sacrifice, and technological innovation, the film promotes Chinese values of solidarity and collaboration, positioning China as an emerging power in the entertainment industry. Its international success, as one of the highest-grossing Chinese films, demonstrates the country's ability to produce large-scale, high-quality cinematic experiences that resonate with global audiences, acting as a form of cultural export that enhances China's soft power by presenting its vision of the future and solidifying its presence in the global entertainment market (Brennan, 2021).

Russian Cinema:

Power by promoting cultural heritage and technological achievements to global audiences. *The Last Warrior* (2017) functions as a tool of soft power by showcasing Russia's rich cultural heritage and its ability to produce high-quality, globally appealing entertainment; by modernizing traditional Russian

stories, the film promotes Russian history, traditions, and values in a way that resonates beyond national borders, enhancing Russia's cultural influence by presenting its folklore as both unique and connected to contemporary global storytelling, while also highlighting the strength of Russian cinema and positioning the country prominently within the global entertainment industry (The Last Warrior (2017), n.d.). Similarly, Sputnik (2020), a Russian science fiction film, leverages Russia's history of space exploration to emphasize the country's scientific and technological capabilities; set during the Cold War, it tells the story of a Soviet cosmonaut returning to Earth with an extraterrestrial being, blending elements of horror and scientific ambition. Through its depiction of the Soviet space program, the film fosters national pride in Russia's space legacy, presents the country as a hub of advanced science and exploration, and highlights the sophistication of the Russian film industry, demonstrating its ability to produce high-quality, globally engaging cinema. By combining historical references with modern cinematic techniques, Sputnik contributes to Russia's soft power by projecting its cultural and scientific narrative onto the international stage ('Sputnik Movie Review & Film Summary (2020) Roger Ebert', n.d.).

Indian cinema

Indian cinema exemplifies the use of film as a strategic tool of soft power, projecting cultural identity, historical narratives, and social values to global audiences. RRR (2022), which stands for "Rise, Roar, Revolt," encapsulates the film's central theme of the struggle for freedom and resistance against colonial oppression, reflecting India's growing ambition to showcase its culture and soft power internationally; set during the British colonial era, it tells a fictional story of two revolutionary heroes, blending action with themes of resistance, liberty, and unity, and functions as a cultural export that highlights India's rich history and storytelling traditions while portraying the fight against colonial oppression in a way that resonates with global audiences. Through its emotionally charged narrative, RRR positions India as a significant force in global cinema, capable of influencing cultural perceptions worldwide ('L'éthique au cinéma', n.d.). Similarly, Dangal (2016), an Indian sports drama based on the true story of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler who trained his daughters to become world-class athletes, addresses themes of gender equality, perseverance, and empowerment, serving as a powerful cultural ambassador for India. From a geopolitical perspective, Dangal has enhanced India's soft power, particularly in countries like China, where it achieved remarkable box office success; its global appeal and strong feminist message resonated with international audiences, portraying India as a progressive nation embracing social change and breaking societal barriers. Through its worldwide impact, Dangal emphasizes the importance of sports and women's empowerment, aligning with broader diplomatic and cultural objectives (Satyendra Kumar Prasad & V. Santhi Siri, 2017).

European Cinema:

The cultural geography of Europe today is highly complex, as the efforts of the European Union in the twenty-first century to formulate a shared concept of the "old continent" intersect with a wide range of deep-rooted historical differences that divide East from West, North from South, Catholics from Protestants, former Eastern Bloc countries from Western liberal democracies, industrial regions from agricultural areas, urban centers from rural areas, as well as English from French, among other divisions (György, 2020). European cinema provides compelling examples of how film functions as a medium for reflecting historical memory, shaping political narratives, and enhancing cultural influence on the global stage. Cold War (2018), directed by Paweł Pawlikowski, is a Polish romantic drama set in the aftermath of World War II, portraying the personal and political tensions experienced by individuals divided by the ideological confrontation between East and West during the Cold War. The film offers a nuanced representation of Poland's historical position under Soviet influence, while also serving as an artistic reflection on identity, memory, and national experience. Its international

recognition, including the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival and multiple Academy Award nominations, contributed to elevating Poland's visibility in global cinema. By presenting a story deeply rooted in its national history and cultural context, *Cold War* strengthens Poland's soft power by positioning it as a source of high-quality artistic production and fostering global dialogue about its past and identity (Aren Bergstrom, 2019). Similarly, *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), directed by Taika Waititi, employs satire to critique Nazi ideology through the perspective of a young German boy during World War II. Through a blend of humor and emotional narrative, the film addresses themes such as propaganda, prejudice, and the transformative impact of human relationships. Geopolitically, it delivers a broader message on the dangers of extremism and the importance of tolerance, using its historical German setting to engage with Europe's wartime legacy. The film's critical and commercial success enhances the international profiles of both Germany, as the contextual backdrop, and New Zealand, as the producing country, reinforcing their cultural influence and soft power. By connecting historical lessons to contemporary global issues of division and intolerance, *Jojo Rabbit* further underscores the geopolitical relevance of cinema as a medium for cross-cultural communication and ideological reflection (Swampflix, 2019).

Middle Eastern Cinema:

Middle Eastern cinema is understood within the framework of what is known as "Third Cinema," which seeks to highlight national cultural narratives, address social issues, and contribute to the enhancement of soft power on a global scale. The film *The Salesman* (2016), directed by Asghar Farhadi, serves as an example of this, as it presents an Iranian drama that addresses themes of morality, justice, and psychological trauma through the story of a couple confronting the aftermath of a violent incident (MARTIN & Peter, 2001). The film provides a profound reflection on societal dynamics in Iran, offering insight into the complexities of human relationships and cultural norms. Geopolitically, *The Salesman* enhances Iran's soft power by showcasing its cinematic artistry and sophisticated storytelling to international audiences, and its Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film highlighted Iran's ability to produce world-class cinema despite political and economic challenges. Furthermore, the film became a symbol of resistance and cultural diplomacy when Farhadi boycotted the Oscars in protest of the U.S. travel ban on Iranian citizens, drawing attention to issues of global discrimination and promoting dialogue on cultural understanding and political boundaries (Wiegand, 2021). Similarly, *Capernaum* (2018), directed by Nadine Labaki, is a Lebanese drama that tells the harrowing story of a young boy living in extreme poverty who sues his parents for bringing him into the world. The film addresses urgent social issues such as child labor, refugee crises, and economic inequality in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. From a geopolitical perspective, *Capernaum* exemplifies Lebanon's ability to tackle global humanitarian concerns through cinema, fostering empathy and awareness for marginalized communities. Its success, including a Cannes Film Festival award and an Academy Award nomination, enhanced Lebanon's soft power by positioning the country as a voice for vulnerable populations and as a producer of globally resonant and impactful cinema (Manar Hesino & Manal al-Natour, 2023).

Conclusion

The examples presented highlight the significance of cinema as a powerful tool of soft power in the context of geopolitical influence. Countries that have developed strong film industries are able to project their culture, values, and historical narratives on the global stage, while also strengthening international relations through cross-national cinematic collaborations. Successful films not only shape perceptions but also provide economic and strategic benefits by opening markets, attracting tourism, and showcasing creative industries. With the expansion of modern platforms such as global streaming services and investments in compelling storytelling, nations can further enhance their geopolitical influence.

In the Arab world, countries possess substantial potential in culture, arts, music, and literature. However, significant disparities remain among Arab states in terms of investment in these areas, which limits a unified impact in education, scientific research, and the deployment of soft power strategies. To achieve a stronger presence on the global stage, it is essential to invest in cultural and educational infrastructure and to promote regional cooperation, thereby maximizing the collective influence of Arab nations.

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