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Motions in Pictures: From Habermas's Informal Political Sphere to Formal Politics in the Films *Footloose*, *Land and Freedom* and *The Beguiled*

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Abstract: This article analyses three historical fiction films, *Footloose*, *Land and Freedom* and *The Beguiled*, to help illuminate aspects of politics and political theory. We study them to explore the relationship between Habermas's concepts of the lifeworld and political spheres, which analysts have critiqued as opaque. Drawing on Habermas's theory of communicative action, we debate prevailing understandings of the implications of his work for deliberative democracy via an exploration of the films. By expanding the definition of the term 'motion' (otherwise known as 'draft resolution'), we relate this concept to these Habermasian themes. Thus, this paper analyses feature film case studies as they incorporate motions into fictionalised accounts. We suggest that focusing on these movies' motions, embedded in unfolding narratives, can help reconceive Habermas's work to illustrate fluidity in how people and ideas may move between informal and more formal spheres. Ultimately, by showcasing the importance of motions in political participation, via these movies, we advance the idea that motions may be seen as part of a ladder of involvement, providing further opportunities for encouraging participation.

Keywords: cinema; deliberative democracy; Habermas; motions and resolutions; political participation



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1. Introduction

Theorists have argued that cinema can operate to express political and ethical concepts, aid engagement with political thought and illustrate critique (Teays 2012; Giroux 2011). Furthermore, Robert Porter (2007) has used dramatic film to demonstrate, and also to reshape, Jürgen Habermas's conception of autonomy. In this article, we argue that cinema can be used to help reconsider another notion typically ascribed to Habermas's thinking: his demarcation between the informal and the formal world. Moreover, we suggest that by considering the relatively neglected instrument of democracy—the motion—within film, further Habermasian themes can be analysed and reinterpreted. It is with this that we start.

A motion, or draft resolution, is a proposal put to a group (Thomas 2018). The group is less, or more, formally constituted. A resolution then refers to a decision, a formal expression of opinion, or intention, agreed on by the group. It is composed of affirmative, or non-affirmative, sentences that may be accepted, rejected or amended. It can debate facts, judgement, values or policy (Anna Lindh Foundation n.d., p. 6).

Nevertheless, the motion has a place in democratic practice that is curiously underappreciated in political thought. While a plethora of participative techniques have grabbed attention (e.g., Bächtiger et al. 2018), the motion is a relatively unexplored area of engagement and policy-creation in liberal democracies. The process of motion development includes aspects of participative practice, requiring consideration alongside theories of democracy and leadership (Alonso et al. 2011), including those of deliberative democracy.

The motion is typically passed or defeated by a vote, after minimal, through to lengthy, deliberation. In forums that are increasingly more deliberative, indicative votes, or simply discussion, may continue until unanimous agreement (e.g., [Maeckelbergh 2009](#)). However, Andy [Blunden \(2016\)](#), for instance, finds longer deliberative processes impractical for many decisions, such as taking strike action. Voting is a collective action which can, of course, be undertaken by just three people in a group, through to millions. And it may include voting for people, parties or ‘motions’, within the context of shifting levels of public debate. (It is notable that the term ‘vote’ can sometimes be shorthand for motion. In our films, we may refer to a ‘voting scene’, meaning ‘scenes where a motion is debated and voted on’).

However, there is a grey area around the definition of a ‘motion’, which we suggest is highlighted in the films we analyse. Thus, we suggest, a motion may include an unwritten proposal, a suggestion, a demand, a statement or a report to be agreed upon. While it is appropriate to differentiate between these forms, it is still useful to highlight their common role. And we use the terms interchangeably. Therefore, we can define motions to include actors discussing and then communicating a written or writable statement that aims to be shared and agreed upon through some process of collective decision-making.

The underappreciation of the notable role of motions in democratic thought reaches back in the analysis of the history of democracy to ancient Athens. (Habermas focuses on the Athenian distinction between the hidden, private, sphere and the public sphere ([Habermas 1991](#))). Many scholars’ reviews of democracy start in Athens at around 500–300 BCE ([Cartledge 2016](#)). (The uniqueness of this time and place has been questioned, however ([Sen 2017](#))). Athenians’ arrangements for collective decision-making, and resolutions—which were literally set in stone—have the motion at their heart. Yet, thinkers have tended to ignore the role played by the invitation for, and control of, motions put to ‘the people’ ([Cartledge 2016](#)). Smaller committees and councils guided the agenda of the main Athenian assembly of 6000 (only free men). But the assembly also, on occasion, called for these steering groups to draft specific motions ([Rodewald 1974](#), in [Held 2006](#)). This concern with controlling agendas, and potentially keeping issues away from debate, is the subject of Steven Lukes’s salient work on power ([Lukes 1974](#)).

With the concurrent development of Athenian educational institutions and theatre ([Cartledge 2016](#)), the fermentation of ideas may be seen as a ‘public sphere’ commensurate with debating and voting in the assembly ([Habermas 2009](#)). In this context, Pericles (around 420 BCE) saw shared cultural beliefs, about the value of submitting ideas for discussion, as important for facilitating the democratic process ([Held 2006](#)).

Moving forward to the cinema age, scholars approach movie analysis from multiple vantage points. Henry [Giroux \(2011, p. 691\)](#) takes a ‘public pedagogy’ approach, which is pertinent to our study ([Sandlin et al. 2011](#)). Michael Shapiro’s broad aim is also to explore narratives’ pedagogical qualities ([Shapiro 2019, p. 18](#)). Yet, rather than investigating the influencing nature of cultural hegemony ([Giroux 2011](#)), we explore the films’ stories, which can embed, repeat and contextualise motions, to explain and promote understanding of the political tool of ‘the motion’, as well as the political thinking of Habermas.

We posit that articulating motions, alongside associated debates and votes, is a discrete feature of political participation, sporadically initiated from ‘below’ as a challenge to the ‘elite’. Thus, this sometimes bridges the gap separating ‘ordinary’ discussions and formal politics. Moreover, recognising different levels of motions’ formality may indicate different degrees of participation and involvement, which could help inform further work on increasing engagement. And we wish to consider whether films can illustrate this.

2. Habermas: The Lifeworld, the Formal Sphere, Communicative Action and Motions

We argue here that the consideration of motions and associated practices illuminate, extend and, indeed, help to critique aspects of Habermas’s thought.¹ We will review four related issues in this section.

Firstly, we wish to explore whether motions can provide a link between the informal and formal spheres of politics and society. Habermas is deeply concerned about the quality

of debate within the informal public sphere.² He distinguishes between an informal sphere and a formal political sphere, the latter includes political parties' operations (Finlayson 2005; Habermas 2009). Initially, in *The Theory of Communicative Action (TCA)* (first published in 1981), Habermas (2007) made a sharp distinction between the 'lifeworld' and the 'system'. The former refers to 'informal ways of life' (as well as people's cognitive 'horizon of meaning'). And this is "contrasted with [the latter] market and administrative systems" (Outhwaite 1996, p. 369), which includes formal political meetings, for instance.

Yet, while Habermas also sees a separation between the more informal political public sphere and the more formal political sphere in *Between Facts and Norms (BFN)* (first published in 1992), he perceives one as influencing the other, and that civil society also influences the system (Baxter 2011, p. 153; 2005, p. 119; Habermas 2009). Thus, he considers that politics in our everyday lives—the 'informal political sphere'—can, and should, influence the formal political sphere (Anderson 2014, p. 96; Finlayson 2005; Habermas 2007, 2020; Heath 2014, p. 82; Stahl 2013). But, significantly, academics such as Finlayson (2005, p. 119) and Baxter (2011, p. 153) have characterised Habermas's description of this process as imprecise.³ A context for this is that Habermas is writing during a period when radical new social movements, such as the peace and ecology movements, are developing further within the informal public sphere (Habermas 2009, p. 369). He sees these initiatives as "sounding boards" for problems that can be informally amplified and dramatised so that they are taken up by the formal political sphere (Habermas 2009, p. 359). But these informal processes are distinguished from the formal sphere in that they do not share "the burden of decision making" (Habermas 2009, p. 361). He says there are dividing "sluices" that allow issues into the formal system, but it is unclear when, why and how these are activated (Habermas 2009, p. 358). Furthermore, for Habermas, social inequality can distort the operations of civil society (Scheuerman 1999, p. 167). But illegitimate power can, "in the final analysis", only be checked by "a suspicious, mobile, alert, and informed public sphere that affects the parliamentary complex and secures the *sources from which legitimate law can arise*" (Habermas 2009, p. 441).⁴ Thus, Habermas provides a thought-provoking and important analysis of processes influencing political decisions. He takes into account individuals' discussions within this. Nevertheless, he leaves space for further reflection on the operation and influence of more informal decision-making arenas.

Habermas's demarcation between informal and formal spheres could be interpreted as excluding the idea that motions can be formed and voted on in the informal sphere, and also that informal discourse on votes and draft resolutions can be considered in the formal sphere. This is because motions are associated with formal politics (Citrine et al. 2016; Habermas 2006).⁵ Yet, while recognising that there are other routes to empowerment, we wish to show that discourse and dis/agreement on motions can happen in the informal political sphere, which may also influence the formal political sphere. This, thereby, links the 'high art' of legislative procedure with the 'popular culture' of common demands arising in everyday life (Biressi and Nunn 2007). And we consider whether our chosen films showcase this process.

Thus, participation in making suggestions and developing motions can be interpreted as an indicator of the democratic health, or quality, of the public sphere (Merkel 2019). It is partly because of Habermas's interest in bringing the lifeworld into the 'formal political' sphere that we have linked his work to the issue of political participation (see our fourth point below). People may be helped to participate if the lifeworld is clearly linked to more formal processes. Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu and others note, "the ability of the socially dominated to effectively act upon their condition is either limited to weak, non-discursive, practical means . . . [e.g., violent outbursts,] or is open to 'symbolic hijacking' in the transition from practice to verbal representation (*logos*)" (Deer 2014, p. 118). The motion is no panacea for overcoming these barriers to participation. It does, however, warrant further exploration.

Secondly, Habermas is seen as perhaps the key thinker associated with deliberative democracy (Bächtiger et al. 2018). For him, the ideal speech situation is free of coercion

and other pressures, and differences of opinion lead to further 'discourse', until all agree (Habermas 2007). As Habermas's notion of deliberation in speech situations is an ideal perspective, specific issues that transpire in practice need to be analysed. We are interested in the deliberative features of informal and more formal meetings, rather than organised deliberative forums associated with deliberative democracy. Furthermore, a focus on informal motion discourse highlights the specific importance of the *origins of issues for deliberation*, which, as we have seen, is a key issue for power analysis.

Thus, rather than emphasising the importance of Habermas's work for 'formal' deliberative democracy forums, we suggest his schema means the deliberative features of other groups, meetings, or forums are vital to consider (alongside associated issues of different levels of formality in group memberships) (Bächtiger et al. 2018). By focusing on these other meetings, and informal-formal links, we de-emphasise Habermas's distinction between new social movements and parties and associations, a distinction which itself runs the risk of downplaying partisan, redistributive, politics (Habermas 2007). Nevertheless, open, iterative and sustained participation of individuals within groups taking motions, or suggestions, for validation to these groups—that is, bringing issues from the lifeworld into forums—could be interpreted as important in Habermas's work (Habermas 2009). He holds that "...discourse can fulfil its social and pragmatic function all the better because it is a dialogical process, a process that draws people together into meaningful argument" (Finlayson 2005, p. 79).

Furthermore, thirdly, we want to explore the idea that motions are a form of validity claim. Communicative action, for Habermas, indicates that everyone participates in 'validity claims'. In doing so, people use language to make statements involving the propositions that "what the speaker says is true, that it is sincerely meant, and that it is normatively appropriate", i.e., just and fair (Habermas 1975, 2007; Outhwaite 1996, p. 11). As in TCA (Habermas 2007), here communication requires motion 'writers' to think about what other people will think and do. It is also about learning, since people will learn what others think. The motion is a statement, so it can be tracked across conversations. We investigate whether the films identified can help to illustrate this.

Fourthly, while Habermas may be invoked to promote deliberative forums, his communicative action perspective is also a participative perspective, involving all people. Habermas encourages an optimistic view of people's aptitude for participation since we all make and respond to (validity) claims in everyday conversation. But, again, for Habermas, money and power in complex specialised societies can exert a wide and corrosive influence (Habermas 2007). The problem of encouraging political engagement, in this context, has been considered from a range of perspectives (Giugni and Grasso 2022; Merkel 2019). Below we will explore if, in films, people are encouraged and helped by others, in small groups, to put forward ideas and make suggestions to more organised bodies. We do this in order to examine the bridging of the informal to the more formal. Bourdieu also recognises labour parties and trade unions can play a key role in helping individuals to cluster and mobilise to put forward demands (Crossley 2014). Thus, motions can show a possible route to empowerment (Laverack 2016), alongside playing a role in political participation, although this is not a focus of Habermas's thought.

To summarise, employing Lukes (1974), we have highlighted the issue for democracy of control of motions in ancient Athens and beyond. We have stressed the importance and flexibility of the term 'motions' as well as how motions relate to Habermasian themes. But we have also drawn on Bourdieu and Habermas to highlight the different worlds people operate in and the day-to-day life that influences involvement in articulation and communication of demands.

Thus, for Habermas (2007), everyday lives contain communicative actions that operate around validity claims of truth, justice and sincerity. This is notwithstanding that people may lie, and hide motives and information. But the formal political sphere is detached from this world, with the bridging between the two unclear. So, we suggest here that our film data can illustrate the linking of Habermas's informal and formal spheres, by

way of motions. This leads to our primary research question: Can analysis of motions in cinema illuminate this bridging of Habermas’s informal and formal spheres? And further to this: How is deliberation in film integrated into the informal and formal worlds? This latter question is relevant as it highlights the deliberative features in the process of motion development, and also retains the empowering aspect of access for all in making claims through motions. The first question is significant because it uses the idea of the motion to aim to, ultimately, envisage Habermas’s work in a new light.

3. Methodology of Motion Analysis Through Film

In this section, firstly, we discuss the rationale for selecting the films analysed, then we set out an overview of these films. Thirdly, we justify using film data as a means of illuminating our topic and, following this, the examination of the films via ‘thematic analysis’ is described. Finally, we discuss the relationship between cinema and reality.

We have chosen feature films using a purposive, non-random, selection process that provides data to illuminate a range of formal and informal scenarios (Hansen and Machin 2013), as indicated in Table 1. Our approach means a discrete number of films are analysed in depth. Thus, our films may be seen as case studies of motions (Creswell and Creswell 2017). We selected the movies as those most appropriate for elucidating our ideas because they all have identifiable motions, debate and voting scenes, yet they are very different from each other in terms of high and popular culture, plots, characters and directors. While illustrating points on political theory they nevertheless provide entertainment (Jarvie 1978, p. 149). In doing so, they offer varied perspectives and conceptions of what is ‘political’ (Porter 2007). That said, the total range of potentially relevant films is not especially extensive. Some others, such as *Women Talking* (Polley 2023) or *Made in Dagenham* (Cole 2010) could have been included. Others such as *Twelve Angry Men* (Lumet 1957) are tangentially relevant. In non-film formats, *Mrs. America* (2020), for instance, is clearly pertinent. In our films, the motion is seen in use across a wide political terrain from small-town liberal democratic, and civil war-torn private school, America to revolutionary tumult in Spain. Our selection therefore has a more particular remit than what others have described as ‘political movies’ (Scott 2011). Nor is there any claim for these films to be representative of a genre. Instead, the sample includes films where voting in its widest sense is dramatized, coming from the mainstream and art-house sectors. (It may be noted Habermas (2007, 2018) also uses stories to illustrate his theory).

Table 1. Film case studies’ summary details.

<i>Footloose</i> (1984) Director: Herbert Ross, & <i>Footloose</i> (2011) Director: Craig Brewer Unless specified as 2011, our analysis refers to both films	<i>The Beguiled</i> (2017) Director: Sofia Coppola (previously, Dir: Don Siegel 1971; Thomas Cullinan book (1966))	<i>Land and Freedom</i> (1995) Director: Ken Loach (influenced by: George Orwell’s autobiographical account (1938) <i>Homage to Catalonia</i> (Archibald 2012, p. 156))
Leads, played by: <i>Ren McCormack</i> , Kevin Bacon (1984); Kenny Wormald (2011) <i>Reverend Shaw Moore</i> , John Lithgow (1984); Dennis Quaid (2011)	Lead, played by: <i>Headteacher, Miss Martha</i> , Nicole Kidman	Lead, played by: <i>David Carr</i> , Ian Hart
Mainstream film (box office: >USD 80 million (1984 version) >USD 63 million (2011 version)	Mainstream film (box office: >USD 27 million)	Art house film (box office: >USD 228,800)
Formal state-mediated motion and voting scenes. However, these are not the focus of the film	Informal collective decision-making with a more formal authority figure. However, not the key theme of the film	The debate scene is core to the film and includes political party members

Table 1. Cont.

Plot summary: Ren decides he wants to democratically overturn a ban on dancing previously introduced after a town council vote. He takes his proposal to the same council. He is helped by friends, family, and, at one point, workers and owners of a mill (where there is space to hold a dance outside of the town's jurisdiction).	Plot summary: The pupils and staff at a girl's school decide to take in a wounded enemy soldier during the American Civil War. They help him recover and several sexual liaisons and jealousies develop. He becomes aggressive and the women and girls take a further decision on how to deal with this.	Plot summary: Spanish and international volunteers opposed to Franco's fascism in Spain are seen training, moving to positions, debating politics and fighting. Their aims include supporting people in poverty by redistributing land. But they encounter opposition within the anti-Franco forces and they debate how land should be divided.
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For our purposes, *Footloose* (Ross 1984) and *Footloose* (Brewer 2011) are similar films, and we have treated them in tandem. The later version, although less well-known, encompasses more scenes on the progress of resolutions throughout the film and thus most clearly illustrates the arguments of our paper. So, we use the later film, but, where the movie's date is not mentioned, the same scene appears in both versions. *Footloose* (Brewer 2011) has two voting scenes on the legality of dancing. *Footloose* (Ross 1984) starts after the resolution to enact a dancing ban. Both feature films show the development of a motion to overturn the ban and we investigate the lead-up to the vote on this (for consistency, we refer to the overall number of films as being three). *The Beguiled* (Coppola 2017) also has, what we class as, two voting scenes in it. This allows us to analyse questions of democracy from informal and less informal perspectives. *The Beguiled*'s scenes may be seen as an allegory for democracy, but are perhaps not designed as such (the 1971 version diverges significantly from Coppola 2017). *Land and Freedom* (Loach 1995) is a more explicitly political art-house movie. It comes from a director whose work testifies to social commitment, especially focusing on poverty, inequality and injustice, and the film is based on historical research. Here, the key voting scene has major implications for wealth redistribution, which is an important issue for democratic, political, plebiscites. This is also a concern of Habermas, since he finds money, as we have seen above, can corrode democracy and, beyond this, he finds a tension between capitalism and democracy (Habermas 2007, vol. 2, pp. 280–81, 345). In this film, set during the Spanish Civil War, our analysis centres on a scene where a motion is put to a group of villagers and international fighters.

Beyond the question of how we chose our examples, one might ask, why have we used cinema at all in our study? As with Wanda Teays's (2012) work on ethics, our movies supply story scenarios that illustrate theoretical themes. The films provide dialogue through the time leading up to, and following, voting scenes. Furthermore, the feature films enable viewers' sight of events and the ability to regard different orders of social reality that individual actors, as motion discussants, have not seen (see also Shapiro 2019, p. 17). Thus, our use of film here is linked to our subject of motions since, as we have argued, motions are generally disregarded in assessments of political participation and yet are integral to democracy. It can be suggested that cinema has the capability to open our eyes to experiences beyond those we notice in the real world, those which may be hidden in our everyday lives (Rushton 2010).⁶ Porter (2007) also suggests that using different media can help people to see political theory in different ways. So, film opens up complex political models to more expansive, visually arresting forms, and some aspects of political critique can be embodied visually. The viewer can see non-verbal issues that may stifle motion discussion, including, for example, the impact of formal dress, or facial expressions. Our films show some plausible, diverse, ways people engage with motions to different degrees of formality and indicate motions' variety. In movies, we can see how meeting participants are arrayed in meeting spaces, how they interact, who is silent, who speaks and how they sometimes speak over each other. Habermas's interest in civil society, dialogue in informal politics, deliberation and formal politics means that the way films' narratives shift stories seamlessly and swiftly between these worlds is relevant to our investigation. Indeed, others have analysed film focusing on Habermas's linguistics writings (Neumann 2012). While

other art forms can perform these functions and all may draw on audience imagination, and, whereas we do not claim any unique properties for film in assessing political philosophy, it remains that “. . . movies are a rich source of ideas about, information. . . concerning, and criticism, of society” (Jarvie 1978, p. xi). Thus, academics, from a wide range of disciplines, find movies highly effective platforms for entering into pedagogical discussions on ideas surrounding social critique (for example, Pratt 2006; Botchway and Hoang 2016). And our study has used movies for research in a similar vein.

To facilitate studying the films, we conducted a thematic analysis. This works to identify, organise and offer insights into patterns of meaning or themes within a dataset (Flick 2013). We searched for themes in the films and categorised them (Braun and Clarke 2021; Daher-Nashif 2021). Following Virginia Braun and Clarke (2021, pp. 34–35), this involved a six-stage reflexive approach. Firstly, there was familiarization. Next was initial coding where 140 codes were identified, after which we generated a longlist of 44 themes. We then developed, reviewed and collated further in two rounds. This culminated in a shortlist of 11 themes (see Appendix A). In the final stage of writing up, commonalities across the films and themes were summarised and differences recognised. The process of identifying themes required reflection and prioritisation to “tell a coherent . . . story” (Braun and Clarke 2021, p. 35). The thematic analysis has helped us to recognise and synthesise shared and discrete attributes of the movies containing motions.

By analysing the screenplay and the films themselves, we distil and reflect on themes regarding the visual drama, not just the dialogue. We have analysed the scripts for content, such as the relationships developed and subsequent decision-making. We have also considered themes that relate to the article’s opening discussion on democracy. Building on the script analysis, we consider the emotions of the players as indicated visually. Their concentration and planning, the constellation of interactions between players on the screen and what we can surmise takes place outside of the camera’s field of view are considered. We reflect on indications of points where players did not know what others are going to do. We also draw on original material from an interview about the voting scene the first author conducted with the director of *Land and Freedom*, Ken Loach (17 December 2021), and publicly available interviews with Sofia Coppola (Vanity Fair 2017).

Cinema has been used to aid the analysis of class, race, gender, and political and cultural issues (Kaczmarek 2020; Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2020). Nevertheless, analysis of films in order to provide political critique runs the risk of riding roughshod over one of the specificities of movies; their visual form (Porter 2007). The danger remains that we superimpose the political analysis onto the film (Porter 2007). To briefly address the thorny issue of the relationship of cinema to reality, we should be aware that these movies are works of fiction, based on the imagination of those involved in their production. It would be a mistake, of course, to read them off as providing an ‘unbiased truth’. Moreover, the films consider times of conflict and we should be aware that such drama tends to focus on antagonism while condensing and simplifying events when reimagining history on screen (Engert and Spencer 2009). Nonetheless, as Andrew Tudor (2013) has argued, film has a role in making multiple realities plausible, which we, as audiences, can accept or reject according to our predispositions. It is our assessment that the plausibility of the development of plots in movies is part of the way in which we, as audiences, render films as meaningful. Thus, while cinema may distort and dramatize to gain popularity with its audience, movies can also help us to explore the logic of theoretical premises (Engert and Spencer 2009; Giroux 2011). Our examination is not meant to depend on providing some ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ analysis of the films or the production teams’ intentions. It need not have any relationship to their understanding of ‘reality’, or even our or your experience. More, it is whether our subjective interpretation of the films accord with what we, as the paper’s authors, and its readers perceive to be a plausible or possible reality.

4. Motions in Film: The Informal and the Formal

Across all three films, we found protagonists' draft resolutions are discussed in both informal and more formal settings. They are often developed collectively in informal groups and deliberation can take place informally, and as part of more formal groups. Ideas and more concrete proposals develop through discourse between players in which suggestions are challenged, or inhabitants of the formal world initiate suggestions for discussion and agreement. Thus, in the films, people's informal, less informal and the more formal worlds are linked, with motions providing a thread. We see players' proposals gestating in these different worlds and being transported between them, from less to more formal spheres. Claims of truth, justice and sincerity are made in support of ideas. Characters listen to others' claims for suggestions. And group learning takes place, with different players being encouraged to participate.

Footloose (Brewer 2011) opens with a vote on a motion: a small American town's council bans dancing. This follows a car crash where young people were killed, including the son of one of the councillors (Cllr. the Reverend Shaw Moore). Thus, here, an archetypal inhabitant of the formal political sphere links decision-making to the informal world of his bereavement, and music and dance, prompted by the crash. Three years later, teenager Ren McCormack moves to the town, not knowing the culture. We see him having to learn about the dance and music laws informally through experience, gleaning information through discourse while moving in circles of supportive friends and family, acquaintances and enemies. So, relationships and experiences drive what Ren sees as desirable and possible to achieve. Furthermore, deliberating with a friend while repairing a car, Ren decides to try to overturn the dancing ban. We find informal small groups' conversations are key to the development of the motion. Thus, the transition between the informal and the formal also has a collective character. The educational aspect of learning how to write the demand is later reinforced in the 2011 version, with Ren visiting a library to look up petition procedures to get the motion heard. The suggestion becomes written media. In both film versions, Ren's future girlfriend helps with his speech supporting the motion. The quality of democracy appears to be improved by the enabling of pedagogical conversations on demands in the lifeworld. With more informal support and discourse, he takes 'his' proposal to a second meeting.

The motions in *Footloose* are justified via broad claims to truth (e.g., 'young people can be unsafe'), justice (e.g., 'balancing of freedoms is needed') and sincerity (e.g., 'tough decisions are made for love'). Difficulties in deciding how to vote are evident from the characters' expressions. While decisions may be taken before the meetings, listening to and seeing others can lead to indecision and minds being changed. We see the hesitancy of Reverend Moore's vote, as he is torn between his peers on the council and his family's concern for the impact of the decision. No matter how long a formal debate is, any participant can, the next day, regret their decision, as we see in this film. We sense that Moore is conflicted, and he draws on his beliefs to justify his voting.

In *The Beguiled* (Coppola 2017), motions and votes are also enacted within informal and less informal spheres (the less informal here is a continuum from the informal, and increased formality simply means being more controlled by an authority figure in the form of a headmistress, Miss Martha). Set in the US South during the Civil War, the students and headmistress of an isolated girls' school take in an enemy soldier and nurse him back to health, whereupon he starts to disrupt relations.

Characters make a series of collective decisions. The initial voting scene comes after the soldier is out of immediate medical danger, a third of the way into the film. In contrast to the neophyte Ren McCormack in *Footloose*, it is the powerful figure of Miss Martha who comes up with the proposal. We realise she may have dual motives for this. Her words are as follows: "I will allow Corporal McBurney to remain until his leg heals" [i.e., the motion]. "If one of you is opposed, I will tell the soldiers and let them decide what to do with him. She looks around at the girls—no hands are raised" [i.e., the vote]. However, one girl (Jane) is known not to agree; nevertheless, she does not raise her hand (she is more

predisposed to not trust Yankee soldiers as her father has taught her this). There is a fear of making the wrong decision and of going against the majority.

The interactions in this group highlight how their everyday communications are managed, as here a person (Miss Martha) has formal authority to control when, whom, and where people meet for decision-making. Related to this, we might particularly wonder why the headmistress consulted all the girls in the initial vote. Harking all the way back to the fragile and disputed arrangements of ancient Athens, where the assembly of 6000 had equal voting rights, here she could be interpreted as accepting a cultural notion that all schoolgirls' votes are equal. This concept of 'one person-one vote' is an integral aspect of the process of voting on motions. She, perhaps, both needs full agreement to ensure all are committed to a course of action that is illegal and also conceives that this is a proper method to proceed with. In leading, Miss Martha even goes further than employing a 'counsel' approach (Blunden 2016, vol. 84, p. 5). Counsel takes into account participants' views but, ultimately, the leader takes responsibility for the decision. However, in the scene, the headmistress claims that any one girl's dissent would change her action.

The girls and women are, over the days and nights, repeatedly reflecting on, reinforcing and developing their opinions and knowledge through different experiences before the voting meetings. Informal deliberation is evident. Different combinations of characters talk to each other, watch each other, and build and quash alliances. Those who are friends converse more. Proposals gestate and different players have different reasons for supporting the initial motion they endorse. Thus, as with *Footloose*, we can see that many small interactions and events before the key meetings build up to the decisions and the girls' everyday lives contain communicative actions. The film explores how notions of truth and sincerity can be subverted in the lead-up to a vote. There are accusations, including false accusations. They also lie to each other, and themselves, there is subterfuge, and they are misled and naïve. They dress up, pretend things are better than they are and want quick fixes. Collective memory seems to have some influence on behaviour, and the women and girls reflect on when things were done differently before the war.

The first decision, which is led by the headmistress's 'motion' to keep the soldier, is accounted for by ethics ("I couldn't leave him there to die"). It also suggests both a lack of decision-making and a curiosity to see what will happen. Meanwhile, human error and stretched resources mediate the decision. Misunderstandings and incompetence are evident before and during the meetings. Instrumental reasoning and different characters' and groups' views are shown throughout, relating to Habermas's discussion of discourse coming from different 'perspectives' (Habermas 1990, in Outhwaite 1996, p. 188).

A second vote is taken with almost no discussion; full agreement and mutual consent are sensed, and portrayed by glances. The group then works as a team to implement their plan. The pivotal role of the headmistress as meeting chair here is again indicated. Habermas's ideal speech situation (referred to earlier) requires there to be no coercion. Yet, even Maeckelbergh (2009), who is a strong defender of deliberation and unsupportive of voting, does not resolve the dilemma of the need for meeting co-ordinators when a decision is to be made. In addition, in *The Beguiled*, the dynamics and shifts in inequality of knowledge, power and interests between group participants are seen. A concern of deliberative analysis is that participants' comprehension can differ (Bächtiger et al. 2018). Here in the film, this divergence is based mainly on age. The headmistress has the skill to stitch the soldier's wound, for instance. Nevertheless, it is Amy, the youngest girl, who holds vital knowledge utilised at the end of the film.

At the time of the first meeting, no one knows the exact consequences of the decision, which they might have changed if they'd had the chance to rewind time. The process of being won over is based on contingent assessments and unknowns. If the soldier is not likely to survive, then deciding to help him is not such a tough decision. There is a reinterpretation of the objective of the 'motion'. The original plans go off-kilter as the soldier recovers. The topic of debate, i.e., what to do about the soldier, is clearly of interest: "The girls cluster round him, fascinated" (Kamp et al. n.d.). However, there are unclear and

multiple aims and objectives. The headmistress later explains and justifies the path set. But circumstances intervene and cause swift group thinking and abrupt changes of opinion.

Finally, in *Land and Freedom* (Loach 1995), we follow a group of anti-fascist, anti-Stalinist, Marxists through their experiences of the Spanish Civil War.⁷ The key voting scene is a little under halfway into the film and runs for just over ten minutes. The meeting takes place in a village with local peasants, political party members (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM)) and foreign fighters present. The proposal, or motion, is whether to just collectivise the land of an aristocrat, or whether to make all the villagers' land collective. Drawing from Habermas's concerns, the individuals' debate contains cooperative elements, as arguments are listened to and responded to (Habermas 1990, in Outhwaite 1996, p. 186). A learning process building to the vote is coupled with a set of background shared values. There is both a sense of a wider enemy and differences between allies.⁸

Our focus on motions moving from informal to more formal arenas is again evident here. Before the voting scene, the viewer has already encountered the general question put to this meeting. Moreover, fragments from the informal and formal spheres, seen in Liverpool meetings, Barcelona cafes, in leaflets and posters, and the diverse and unifying dialogical experiences of participants, build up a picture, pointing to mutual engagement to repel fascism. The foregrounded context is war logistics and peasant poverty. As with *Footloose*, aspects from 'life outside' penetrate the meeting; a character even points to a window, referring to the external world (Habermas 1990, in Outhwaite 1996, p. 187). Further themes unfolding before and during the meeting in the film include issues such as deciphering of historical 'facts', emotional bonds and camaraderie, different types of decision-making (e.g., the soldiers' decisions in a shootout) and, after the voting scene, betrayal, by other anti-Franco forces. The deliberation is mediated by the constraints of money and power (Habermas 2007), for instance potentially supportive foreign governments attaching strings to aid. Likewise, we see in *Footloose* access to private building space influencing the debate and in *The Beguiled* virtual prison conditions shape thinking.

As in *Footloose*, background beliefs initially inform judgements. The multiple players clearly don't know exactly what is going on in the war, or what will happen if they do, or don't, adopt their proposal. They struggle between facts and norms (Habermas 2009). Validity claims about opportunities for success in the war are made and challenged. Arguments are put forward both to probe what the group thinks and to make factual claims. We see players testing themselves and learning, with others acting as a sounding board. The emotional bonds and hierarchies within the group were revealed before the meeting, so the viewer knows about how knowledgeable and innocent the discussants are. The nervousness of one of the speakers and the fact that he does not really add to the debate are indications of the difference between his lifeworld conversation and a more formal political meeting speech. The drama of collective decision-making is shown.

In addition, the whole occasion is bound by the rules and norms of a 'formal' meeting format. Nevertheless, according to Loach, "it is not that formal a meeting" (interview 17 December 2021). In other words, the cultural pattern of the meeting falls within a loose historically and globally recognisable framework, but the specifics are malleable (Citrine et al. 2016) (labour movement configurations are, of course, highly nation state-specific). The provision of context also demystifies the formal. As with *The Beguiled*, the chair plays a key role, providing rules on speaking and voting. People all appear to accept this and put their hands up to speak, although occasionally many speak at once. Yet, he is not entirely neutral and, at the end of the scene, he celebrates with others, supporting one side. So, these are points where the meeting rules may apply variously. For example, many meetings disallow clapping, while the UK parliament is marked by 'histrionics'. And Xenophon (Held 2006, p. 25) also describes potentially off-putting pre-vote theatrics as far back as ancient Athens.

While the meeting shows deliberative features—people debate each other's claims—it is not an orthodox deliberative democracy forum. A final show of hands displays

the language of ‘yes’ or ‘no’ and indicates division on ‘full collectivisation’. This is an apparent reversal of Habermas’s schema, where, if ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers show disagreement, discourse ensues, but he does endorse compromise and voting under certain conditions (Habermas 2007). And, here, the participants can disagree with the decision but still agree to abide by it, because of an overarching commitment to the method. As with *The Beguiled*, meeting time constraints are inescapable, which is unsatisfactory from a formal deliberative perspective. The depth of debate is limited, and the stakes are high, with the risk of being killed, whatever the outcome, likely. A meeting could in principle decide not to decide until a later date, but, in delaying, opportunities may be lost. Furthermore, at subsequent meetings, some decisions can be changed and some cannot. And, within such meetings, amendments can be made, as we see here, thus further blurring the boundaries of deliberative democracy. It is worth noting that the meeting portrayed, again, did not take place in real life and is a fictional representation. Yet, the scene included participants who had fought in the war and was both scripted and unscripted (Loach interview, 17 December 2021).

5. Analysing Motion Drama—A Discussion

While film has been employed to teach and analyse diverse subjects from ethics to feminism (Teays 2012), it has not been used to distil themes in the tracking of people’s relations with motions, as we do here. And while it has been used to facilitate learning regarding aspects of Habermasian thought (Porter 2007), it has not been used to discuss the linking of the informal and formal spheres, and specific features of deliberation and collective communicative action. What are the key points flowing from this venture? Coming to our research questions, how does the analysis of motions in film illuminate the bridging of Habermas’s formal and informal spheres? In addition, can we see deliberation integrated into these informal and formal worlds?

In all three films, we have seen protagonists transporting motions between spheres, including from the informal proceeding to the more formal. To bring about change, a model emerges: people have ideas, talk them over, distil them into motions and take them to forums to be decided upon by group majorities. Analysing the different films together enables us to imagine an empowering method of political involvement, one that may usefully be explored further by investigating more, real-world, scenarios. The films do not need complex unpacking or to be “read against themselves” (as Giroux suggests *Fight Club* (1999) can be read) to provide insights into the possibility of struggling against “antidemocratic forces” (Giroux 2002, 2011). And this does not invalidate their pedagogical potential. We have found collective informal deliberation that broadens the generally held notions of deliberative democracy. Further to these insights, four summary points can be made.

Firstly, in the films, motions are conceived outside of the meetings and brought in. People move between fluid Habermasian spheres. Pre-vote dynamics and informal meetings plausibly challenge notions of high and low political culture (Biressi and Nunn 2007). Group chat ideas and content make their way into more formal pre-vote discussions. Bourdieu and others, as we have seen, recognise the realm of formal politics can be mysterious and distant for ‘uninvolved’ people (Giugni and Grasso 2022). This may be further complicated by channelling via commercial media outlets and public relations power (Habermas 1991). Together, these issues can contribute to undermining the empowerment of actors in the demos to make suggestions. Yet, just to consider *Footloose*, we can see informal educative moments with friends and relatives appearing to help in challenging this control. This chat then inspires specific knowledge gathering in a library and ‘swotting up’ concerning putting a motion to the council meeting. Some proposals are even pre-tested to an extent, for example, via dancing outside of the town’s border and holding an illegal dance.

Secondly, related to this, here we have found that the fictionalised perspectives on deliberative democracy might credibly suggest this process to be ‘messier’ than more traditional views of deliberative democracy indicate (Bächtiger et al. 2018). This is because small

pre-meeting conversations are not typically included in deliberative democracy accounts, but by tracing conversations through the films we can see their potential impact. The films indicate that deliberation can happen outside of the meeting as well as in it. The different knowledge and experience of group members is seen. New and unpractised meeting attendees are present alongside more experienced players. Role models, friends, family, teachers and leaders are seen as empowering others to attend and take part. Participants share perspectives and knowledge, and reflect on others' views in the informal groups. They form alliances and question motives. We see collective idea formation about demands, which are then raised in more formal deliberation arenas. Thus, agenda-setting for deliberation topics is also found (Lukes 1974).

Nevertheless, thirdly, the well-rehearsed difficulties of collective decision-making are evident in these accounts. Knowledge is not always collectively shared. Unknowns plague the voters. Facts are grappled with and 'sufficing' is seen. The youngest schoolgirl in *The Beguiled* is innocent of the sexual liaisons between the soldier and the older ones. None of the voters in the school knows if the soldier can recover or not. The Reverend Moore in *Footloose* is blindsided by his wife in the second vote, who argues for Ren McCormack to speak. Furthermore, who is present at votes, and who is not, is determined by different types of issues (e.g., the ethics of feeling a duty to attend in *Land and Freedom*, and the exclusion of the soldier in *The Beguiled*). There is a loose relationship between the motions and the aims, in some cases. In *The Beguiled*, for instance, the arguments for keeping the soldier are different for individual girls, but the decision is the same.

Finally, we need to recognise, as might be expected, given the dramatic constraints of cinema discussed earlier, that the films provide an idealised version of the motion. The indeterminate time taken to deal with unscheduled motion amendments is not something that we witness in these film examples. (Although this is an issue that even Xenophon records more than 2000 years ago (Held 2006)). Amendments, while providing scope for deliberation, can still be problematic for people engaged in union meetings, for example, particularly as they may be unwritten. Also, although we have seen the different impacts of the chairs in these movies, by their nature films will normally move the story on, and poor chairing or verbose participants are unlikely to be shown in cinema (Engert and Spencer 2009). So, these negative features have gone unanalysed, and although feature films can help point to pre-meeting contexts and the operation of motions, they cannot be used to fully illustrate all accounts.

While voting to make collective decisions in political meetings may not necessarily be an enticing subject for scriptwriters, our film examples have shown dramatic tension. For instance, the isolation of the voters within meetings in coming to the point of voting is evident. The Reverend Moore, for example, at the start of *Footloose* (Brewer 2011) hesitates, with his daughter looking concerned as to what he will do. Visual analysis shows the tensions in decision-making for voters. Players hold their breath as the vote is cast.

The unique nature of each vote is apparent when the three films are considered. While we might extend this reflection to state that no two votes are ever going to be the same, since time will at least have changed the participants and context, we have seen patterns emerge in the content, context, characters' experiences and dramatic components.

6. Conclusions

Democratic theory tends not to focus on the gestation of draft resolutions. By looking at motions and expanding the definition, we have been able to consider the importance of proposals for the demos. We have used and reinterpreted themes from Habermas's work to integrate the motion into the lifeworld, public sphere and more formal political sphere. To consider our first and fourth objectives, in Section 2, we have suggested here that motions can transpose people and issues from the lifeworld to more formal political systems; a process that Habermas desires, but does not operationalise (Baxter 2011; Finlayson 2005).

To reflect on our second objective, rather than focusing on a narrow interpretation of the deliberative aspect of Habermas's work, in terms of forums, here our analysis has

considered how people can plausibly bring forward ideas and suggestions into political meetings that both deliberate and vote on propositions and plans. Through using feature films, we have seen the possibilities of how people can build up ideas *over time* and how they use small informal groups to deliberate, dissect issues and take space to reflect. We have also seen how diverse ‘formal’ voting meetings are, and we have considered the learning that participants undertake in all these unique meeting situations.

Habermas highlights communicative interactions between people, including the use of validity claims, and asking for and the giving of reasons, alongside the use of discourse to resolve disagreement (Outhwaite 1996). He emphasises the importance of two-way, or multi-way, communication. We have shown that motions in theory, and as exemplified in the films, operate as a form of interactive communication. An important property of motions is, as with validity claims (Habermas 1990; Outhwaite 1996, p. 199), that they can inspire consideration of others’ perspectives since they anticipate some form of vote. The motion may be tested collectively, and this means characters consider others’ views and discuss these. We have identified how these communications are explored in the films and the motion is drawn up with other people’s opinions in mind, to consider our third objective. Furthermore, for Habermas (2007), everyday lives contain communicative actions that operate around validity claims of truth, rightness and sincerity. This is notwithstanding that people may lie, and hide motives and information. We have seen, raised in characters’ discussions on motions in the films, similar validity claims.

Finally, this is not solely a theoretical discussion. Habermas’s concepts and analysis of the lifeworld, public sphere and formal politics inspire diverse considerations of political participation. People in the real world may not put issues onto agendas (Lukes 1974), partly for reasons relating to wider political participation levels (Giugni and Grasso 2022). Yet, we see in our films’ stories plausible examples of multiple people providing informal support to others to encourage engagement and make proposals. Thus, as part of strengthening democracy, the labour movement might aim to further ensure that people hear encouraging invitations to participate informally as well as formally, and are invited to chat about, discuss and devise suggestions coming from their ideas, research and lived experience. That is, inspiring people to move from political informality to more formal arenas such as local government, union or party meetings. Political disappointments, tensions, betrayal, losses and failure are disheartening. The aim of the motion may be to bring ideas forward for agreement as plans and practice, and this can fail. But at the same time, a record is created of attempts. The ideas recorded form part of a culture and history.

It is near axiomatic that political participation in the 21st century is important for resolving vital issues from climate change to increasing inequalities. Effective engagement and political involvement can generate solutions and seal agreements. Consequently, the World Health Organization (2014), for example, has called for more involvement of people in controlling issues influencing human health. With the need to address critical problems facing humanity, it is recognised that all the tools for democratic resolution should be promoted (UNDP 2022). Involvement in meetings, motion-formation and voting on draft resolutions, as our films suggest, can be time-consuming and stressful. But this participation, nevertheless, entails as much drama—and the potential for history-making—as engagement in demonstrations and other more public forms of protest, in seeking political change.

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Appendix A

The themes, as follows, can also be located before, during and after the meetings, thus providing a backdrop and central body to the meetings themselves. They consist of the following:

- i. contexts (e.g., the sound of war);
- ii. motion ideas generation and contexts (e.g., changed circumstances presenting chance for reflection);
- iii. types of knowledge and knowledge gathering (e.g., news updates, experience, opinions of others);
- iv. types of inequality and difference among contributors (e.g., of information access and understanding, age, nationality);
- v. types of communication and connections between participants (e.g., family groups, groups of friends, loose acquaintances, lovers, teachers–pupils);
- vi. ways debates in meetings are addressed by participants (e.g., nervousness) [deliberation];
- vii. reaching decision-points on motions (e.g., individuals' hesitation, difficulties, changing minds) [voting];
- viii. forms of control and empowerment over decision-making on motions (e.g., the role of the meeting chair);
- ix. emotions in the meetings/groups and of the vote and drama (e.g., shouting, clapping, gasping, sullenness);
- x. timings and order of events, and limited time for meetings and discussion (e.g., speed of scenes, repeated votes);
- xi. ethics of communicants (e.g., religious references, empathy for those in poverty).

Notes

- ¹ Habermas has been a leading theoretician of democracy for more than six decades. His writings are extensive and complex, and they have developed and responded to others' work and changing circumstances (Finlayson and Rees 2023). Facilitating effective political involvement is core to discussions on democracy.
- ² As Alexander Kluge reflects, the public sphere is a site where struggles can be decided by other means than war (Kluge and Negt 2016; Flick 2013). Others, such as John Dewey, see public participation in democracy as ethically good (Cruickshank 2014).
- ³ Nicos Mouzelis (1997) and Derek Layder (2005, pp. 228–35), for example, have also critiqued Habermas's conception of agency-structure relations.
- ⁴ Italics in original.
- ⁵ Nancy Fraser (1991, p. 134) also excludes decision-making from the 'weak publics' informal deliberation.
- ⁶ Yet many of the broader claims of Richard Rushton (2010) may be challenged.
- ⁷ An excellent discussion on the entire film is provided by Archibald (2012, pp. 151–67).
- ⁸ Fraser (2018) also discusses the debate scene in *Land and Freedom* as an example of Walter Benjamin's suggestion that film can encourage post-viewing audience discussions and learning. This is because viewers see the characters arguing different perspectives and can extend discussion about these positions afterwards.

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