

## Film review – The Trial of the Chicago 7

Reviewer: Apoorva Sekhar

Film: Trial of the Chicago 7 Director: Aaron Sorkins

Release date: September 30, 2020.

Distributed by: Netflix.

*“It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.” – James Baldwin.*



<https://www.netflix.com/fr-en/title/81043755>

Set in the late 1960s of the USA, after the assassination of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., Trial of the Chicago 7 revolves around the trial of eight activists who were protesting outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago against the participation of the US in the Vietnam War. The film is based on real life events and charts the journey of eight activists named Abby Hoffman, Bobby Seale, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines and Lee Weiner, who were put on trial for conspiracy and crossing state lines with the intent to incite a riot. The trial, which lasted from 1969-70 brings forward important ideas about power inequality, racial injustice, state control and citizen activism. The “political trial” in itself comes to resemble a form of Bourdieu<sup>1</sup> inspired symbolic violence. Interestingly, along with symbolic violence, we also see instances of symbolic resistance. The film maps the manifestation of control and power, in a jarringly non-physical manner, demarcating lives which matter and lives which don’t.

Sorkins releasing the film right before the American elections against the backdrop of the BLM movement serves as a gruesome reminder for us to question our current realities. The characters carry the messages Sorkins’s movies are paradigmatic for. This film drives a thought-provoking sentiment in an extremely eloquent and nerve-wracking way where we’re made to ask ourselves if we’ve made any progress from the 60s at all. In an interview with Netflix<sup>2</sup>, Sorkins talks about the minimal usage of wide angle shots in the movie so as to focus more on up close personal shots. As pointed out by Sorkins in the interview, the scenes of the actual riot primarily have zoomed in shots to focus on ‘the personal’ element. This coupled

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel, Chris. "Symbolic violence and collective identity: Pierre Bourdieu and the ethics of resistance." Social Movement Studies 12, no. 4 (2013): 397-413.

<sup>2</sup> 2 “Inside Aaron Sorkin's Brain | The Trial Of The Chicago 7 | Netflix”, Youtube video, 6:21, “Netflix Film Club,” October 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mobMRWR61io>.

with the art director's choice of not designing the sets in the 60s style points towards a larger theme in the movie, to bridge the gap between cinematic and current reality. The portrayal of the trial throughout the film builds on the commonalities between the 1960s and 2020.

Sorkin's focus on acts of violence in the film can be linked with Hannah Arendt's idea of violence being taken for granted and that sometimes we fail to identify it.<sup>3</sup> It is in this sense that Sorkin's camera zooms into the act of violence in a way such that we don't see it as a sudden event, but rather as something that is structurally rooted against a certain group of people, as in this case, Black people in the USA. Racial injustice is spread across the movie in several scenes. One such powerful scene is when Bobby Seale, the head of the Black Panthers, is physically strained by the police officers in the court for protesting against the killing of Fred Hampton, a fellow member of the Black Panthers.

The scene shows two police officers strangling him down and trying to gag him with a piece of cloth and covering his mouth so that he's not able to speak anymore. This scene, when juxtaposed against David Dellinger's handling in court by the officers upon knocking one of them down, brings forward the various layers of structural racial inequality in American society. Dellinger is just held by the hands and made to forcefully sit down, whereas Bobby Seale was gagged for days straight for similar behaviour. In another scene, when Bobby asks the judge on the first day of the trial why he's not being represented by a lawyer, the judge in a sarcastic way points out that he's being represented by the Black Panthers sitting behind him and smirks it off. Bobby Seale, who was later given a mistrial, was the only activist in the trial who was denied representation by a lawyer.

The second theme of state control and police brutality is shown in the actual riot scene where we see police officers take off their badge and charge all the activists in the Grand Park at Chicago with baseball bats. This scene in the movie is coupled with few real life footage from the actual riots which show us how violent and gruesome the police force was. The merging of cinema and reality here leaves us with a visceral feeling. An important shot here is when we see a woman being molested in the riots which in turn points towards a larger issue of gendered violence where men and women face different forms of violence in the same social setting.

The focus of the movie is on state sponsored violence towards dissent which comes across through various scenes. One of them is the scene where the judge refuses to make the jury listen to the main witness of the defendant, the ex-attorney general, who admits that the Chicago police was guilty for instigating the riots. In another scene, the judge removes the only two members of the jury who were leaning towards the side of the defendants, on the grounds that someone from the Black Panthers had left them violent notes in their mailbox. There was no investigation into it nor was there sufficient proof that the Black Panthers had done so, but nonetheless the jury members were removed. All of this is in the backdrop of a passive conflict between the then-attorney general and the one before him. Since the latter supported the activists, the former is shown in the film to cause hindrances in the trial in order to get the verdict against their favour. This game of mud-slinging between two sides of the government is portrayed throughout the film in a way where we see innocent people getting stuck amidst this conflict and being pawns in the hands of the ones in power. Through the characters of the judge, the policemen and other state officials, the film makes a strong statement about state-sponsored brutality in explicit and implicit ways.

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt, Hannah. "Reflections on violence." *Journal of International Affairs* (1969): 1-35.

While put on the stand, Abby Hoffman says: “I’ve never been put on trial for my ideas before”. This dialogue resonates with our current situation, where our world is moving towards majoritarianism. This theme of the movie is driven through the characters, the script and the sounds of violence in the film. In his interview with Netflix, Sorkin expresses how if the colours were a little modified in the CNN footage of the Black Lives Matter protests in the USA, they’d look exactly like the 1968 protests.<sup>4</sup>

The Chicago 7 did not just represent the typical 60s hippie activist at a protest, but all kinds of regular people who wanted to speak up against the government. It makes us think about the current world where we live in- where dissent is equated with treason in numerous countries, a world where freedom of speech has become a debatable issue, a world where activists, artists, scholars and journalists are being persecuted for their thoughts and ideas by the people in power, a world where the freedom to think becomes a privilege and comes at a certain cost, and a world where the state apparatus is pushing us to adopt an Orwellian newspeak.

The cinematography of the film, while trying to bridge the gap between the 60s and current realities, throws important thoughts at us to reflect on. It makes one wonder whether all these technological advances, wealth accumulation, development models fabricated since the past half a decade have made any difference at all because we are still witnessing the same kind of violence towards vulnerable people and communities. Hoffman keeps repeating “the world is watching” during his testimony in order to show how the violence is being perpetrated not from the bottom but from the top towards the ones in the bottom, and to stress on how this could set a strong precedence for future events. The film captures layers of violence. There is intersectionality to violence that we observe when explicit forms of violence are added to everyday forms of embodied violence.

In alignment with Sorkin’s directorial style, the movie ends with a powerful speech by Tom Hayden. Upon being asked by the judge to make a “brief apology” speech, Hayden-instead of a mournful speech- starts reading out the names of all the recorded fallen American soldiers from the Vietnam War. An act of subversion, an act of monumentalisation, this last scene leaves the viewer with irreconcilable feelings of amusement and emptiness. It makes us question if the past continues to inhere in the present. It puts us in a certain discomfort where we start to realise our current political realities and question if we’ve moved forward in the last half a century. With 2020 being marked as a year of protests, Trial of the Chicago 7 captures a certain political reality that we struggle to come to terms with. It leaves us wondering if Jerry Rubin and Abby Hoffman would have been able to differentiate between 1968 and 2020 at all.

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<sup>4</sup>“Inside Aaron Sorkin's Brain | The Trial Of The Chicago 7 | Netflix”, Youtube video, 6:21, “Netflix Film Club,” October 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mobMRWR61io>.