We might like to suppose that corruption is the exception rather than the rule: the odd bad apple, the isolated incident. But what happens when corruption becomes normal? When a society and a whole climate of opinion are shaped by it?

Marcel Ophuls’ two-part documentary, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, addresses the fall of France in 1940 and its subsequent re-founding. It’s haunted by Vichy and collaboration, which post-war France tried to forget. The two films include accounts of heroism. But they also testify to a troubling truth: plenty were willing to go along with Nazi rule – some passively, a few enthusiastically. The political virtue of many proved easy to corrupt.

*Manda Bala* and *Peepli Live* show divided societies. The Brazil of Jason Kohn’s documentary, it’s suggested, doesn’t just bear the scars of colonial violence and exploitation, but re-enacts them. Political leaders scramble into the ranks of the super-rich by lining their pockets with public funds. In the slums, kidnappers learn to be as ruthless as the elite.

For information about the Guilt Group’s work, see http://www.bbk.ac.uk/bisr/research/guilt-working-group.

BIMI is funded by four schools at Birkbeck: the School of Arts, the School of Law, the School of Social Sciences, History & Philosophy and the School of Science. The University of Pittsburgh is also a partner and co-funder.
GUILT: a series of films

Manda Bala [Send a Bullet]

Jason Kohn, Brazil/USA, 2007, 85 minutes
Birkbeck Cinema
Friday 22 April 6.00 pm - 9.00 pm
Presenter: Luciana Martins

Manda Bala’s tagline is “When the rich steal from the poor, the poor steal the rich”. It explores two features of Brazil today: political corruption and kidnapping.

It sets off on the trail of Jader Barbalho, a politician with a powerbase in the rural and poverty-stricken north-east of the country. The film even manages a short interview with him – an interview cut short when Barbalho refuses to discuss the frog farms scandal. Frog farms were allegedly one of the ways in which embezzled funds were laundered. At the other end of the trail is a genial frog farmer, who once had to choose between his frogs and his wife. God, he claims, put him on earth to raise frogs.

Corruption may do more harm than kidnapping, but its harm can be harder to see. Kidnapping has become a career for one of Kohn’s interviewees, who explains the calculations involved in deciding whether to send a victim’s fingers or her ears to their family. Kohn talks to a victim who’d been confined, eyes taped, with Hitchcock at full blast to mask her screams. After the hacking off of her ear, The Birds pecked their way through her dreams. With a wry smile, she admits she never wishes to see Hitchcock again. Ears can be reconstructed (we’re shown exactly how); but The Birds are still pecking. The kidnappers’ mutilation of their victims may be gorily theatrical, but kidnapping does hidden damage too.

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If no seats are available, please add your name to the waiting list and come anyway. The cinema is rarely full.
The Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image
in association with the BISR Guilt Group presents

GUILT: a series of films

Le Chagrin et la Pitié [The Sorrow and the Pity]
Marcel Ophuls, France, 1969, 120 & 128 minutes
Birkbeck Cinema
Saturday 7 May 11.00am - 6.00pm
Presenter: Michael Temple

Marcel Ophuls is German by birth and Franco-American by adoption. His double documentary picks at tangled loyalties some would sooner forget.

Le Chagrin et la Pitié examines France under occupation. It explores relations between France and other nations (mainly Britain and Germany) and within France itself. As Pierre Mendès-France remarks in the first film (‘The Collapse’), defeat brought not just an impulse to come to terms with the victors and a renewed Anglophobia, but a resurgence of petty internal jealousies. The occupation, Vichy, and their aftermath pose questions about loyalty and legitimacy, and about their corruption.

A preoccupation of the second film (‘The Choice’) is why some collaborated, while others resisted. Denis Rake, the gay SOE war hero, remarks that French workers would give him their last centime, whereas the bourgeoisie was too scared to help. The aristocratic leftist Emmanuel d’Astier de La Vigerie opines that a lot of resistance fighters (including himself) were quixotic failures in society at large. In Ophuls' account, the war was hardly the finest hour for the respectable. If class becomes important in the film, so does memory, as Ophuls’ interviewees variously remember, forget, interpret and reinterpret their pasts.

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In the dirt-poor village of Peepli, Natha and his brother Budhia farm – or pretend to. There’s next to no money in it. Not enough to pay off the bank loan. In danger of losing the farm, Natha and Budhia apply to anyone who might help. One politico contemptuously mentions that the government pays out to the families of farmers who kill themselves. Natha finds himself committed to committing suicide.

More than a quarter of a million Indian farmers have killed themselves since 1995. The problem has spawned investigations, reports and government initiatives. In the film, urban India descends on Peepli, armed with TV cameras. Politicians start looking for photo ops, and the reality of Natha’s plight is obscured by the blaze of publicity – live from Peepli. The film takes a satirical leaf out of Capra’s book (think of Meet John Doe). But, for all its flirting with farce, Rizvi portrays the lives of the poor with too much realism for there to be either a happy or a sensational ending.