



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Russia

Fade from Red: Screening the Ex-Cold War Enemy during the 1990s

Topic of Research:

My study examines the symbiosis between political relations and screen portrayals of former Cold War enemies in Russian and American cinema during the 1990s. Any ideology-sensitive viewing of mainstream films released by both countries from 1985 to the present day reveals not only the micro-shifts in the Russo-American declared policy of cooperation, but also the extraordinary difficulties entailed in jettisoning Cold War rhetoric while simultaneously consolidating an image of national superiority within the broader framework of rapprochement. Given the inextricability of masculinist dominance and national supremacy, gender politics and racial alignments figure as crucial subthemes within the larger political context of Russo-American dynamics on screen.

Approach and Research Methodology:

My argument is grounded in a thorough examination of male-centered American and Russian mainstream cinema from 1990 until the present day—specifically, such action films as *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), *The Russian House* (1990), *The Saint* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), *The Jackal* (1997), *The Peacemaker* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *Cast Away* (2001), and *The Widowmaker* (2002); such Russian offerings (diverse in quality and popularity) as *Taxi Blues* (1990), *American Spy* (1991), *Diuba-Diuba* (1992), *American Boy*

(1992), *Wild Love* (1993), *You Are My One and Only* (1993), *Music for December* (1994), *Everything Will Be Fine* (1995), *American Daughter* (1995), *Barber of Siberia* (1998), and *Brother-2* (2000).

During my four-month stay in Moscow (early March-June30) I (i) acquired and watched copies of those Russian films I was unable to obtain in the U.S., (ii) perused materials at four film libraries: NIIK, Kinotsentr, VGIK—the division of domestic [*otechestvennoe*] cinema, and the division of foreign cinema, and (iii) wrote 70 pages of a draft on most of the Russian films listed above. I now have approximately 600 xeroxed pages not only of Russian criticism and reviews related to the pertinent Russian movies, but also of Russian responses to American portrayals of its former Cold War enemy on screen. The sources currently contained in my large bibliography (16 pages) include not only monographs (e.g., Zara Abdullaeva's *Real'noe kino* [2004]), volumes of essays (e.g., *Ekranizatsiia istorii: politika i poetika* [2003], *Istoriia strany. Istoriia kino* [2004]), major film journals (e.g., *Iskusstvo kino*, *Kinovedcheskie zapiski*, *Seans*) and glossy, 'entertainment'-oriented magazines (e.g., *Ekran*, *Kino-glaz*), but also magazines more diversified in content (e.g., *Ogonek*, *Ekspert*) and a wide range of newspapers (e.g., *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, *Moskovskaia pravda*, *Moskovskie novosti*, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, *Torgovaia gazeta*, *Trud*, *Utro Rossii*, *Vecherniaia Moskva*).

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions:

My investigation combines film analysis (structure, reworking of paradigmatic plots, editing/montage, role of camera angles, music, casting decisions, etc.) with a socio-political perspective. For instance, music plays a key role in Russian films of the 1990s—much more so than in their American counterparts. Russian directors rely on specific songs familiar to their anticipated audiences for thematic emphasis, and those songs frequently reflect a pro- or anti-American attitude: whereas the eponymous song “American Boy” (“American boy, take me away with you...”) transparently embraces a vision of America as the idyllic locus of desired escape—a perception pervasive during the early 1990s—by the mid- and late-1990s disillusionment with the U.S. expressed itself in the incorporation into several films, including the blockbuster *Brother-2*, of a hit song by Nautilus Pompilius tellingly titled “Goodbye, America...” Similarly, the song by Iurii Vizbor that provides the title of Dmitrii Astrakhan's *You Are My One and Only* equates woman with nation as it raises the relentlessly recurrent issue of emigration to America, which the film's protagonist rejects because Russia/wife is his “one and only.” Elsewhere, selection of music taps associations with formerly marginalized or prohibited cultural forms: jazz—as an American import—enjoyed a boom in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, but subsequently had a rocky history owing to its provenance and its inherent “free” improvisations, which undermined the very principles of Soviet ideology. I argue that Pavel Lungin cast Petr Mamonov (the lead singer of the 'subversive' rock group *Zvuki Mu*) as the alcoholic jazz saxophonist in *Taxi Blues* not only to underscore the character's status as an Outsider incapable of social integration, but also to ensure the film's appeal among young audiences.

Paintings likewise fulfill an ideological function in several of the targeted films. Viktor Vasnetsov's famous canvas, *Bogatyr*s [Epic Heroes, 1898], which depicts its three horsemen as the redoubtable protectors of national borders and Orthodoxy in a hyperbolic

image of divinely-ordained valorous masculinity, entered popular mythology during a beleaguered phase of Russia's early history. With Russia's recent loss of empire, that image of indomitable strength proliferates in multiple cultural forms—advertisements, political posters, and film. Identified with the national mission of Russia's new celluloid heroes in *American Boy* and *Brother-2*, the painting figures in both screen narratives, which programmatically contrast America and Russia, to the former's advantage (in 1992) and disadvantage (in 2000), respectively.

My research abroad has confirmed my operating thesis regarding Russia's political and cinematic shift during the 1990s from an idealized concept of America as haven and hospitable ally, to increasing skepticism about America's status as a utopian society motivated by altruistic traditions that gradually hardened into a derogatory dismissal accompanied by an assertion of Russia's moral and spiritual superiority (especially evident in *The Barber of Siberia* and *Brother- 2*). Against this background of eroding expectations questions of borders/emigration, racial alliances, and notions of heroism acquire formidable political significance.

Suggestions for Future Research:

While American studies of Russian culture and Russian scholarship on sundry aspects of American literature and film exist, specialists from both countries by and large seem to resist what I call two-way investigations, which, I contend, reveal broad similarities between the two nations. If my book stimulates further comparative analyses, in addition to tracing politico-cultural tendencies home and abroad during the 1990s, it will extend the purview of film studies within Slavic (and American) studies. It will also establish the fact that jettisoning long-standing enmity is 'mission impossible.' Given the modest corpus of Anglophone research in Soviet and Russian cinema, the field strikes me as promisingly open: future monographs could address, in a comparative mode, issues of genre, ideology, and screen conventions during any period throughout the twentieth century.