

AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1980S

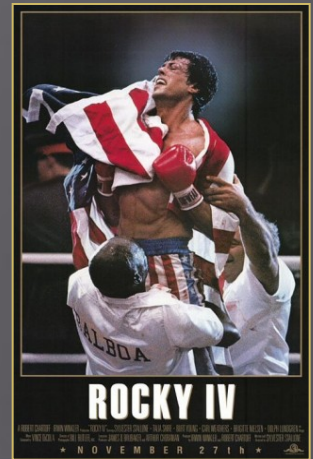
Topic Two: Cold War Cinema

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Masaryk University**

Targeted Learning Outcomes

To develop a sound understanding of:

1. Hollywood and the Cold War
2. 1980s Cold War Cinema as hawkish entertainment
3. 1980s Cold War Cinema as Glasnost Cinema



Cold War Cinema

As well as dramatizing domestic political issues like *The Backlash*, in the 1980s Hollywood handled films about several geopolitical issues

Many of these were action films rooted in recent or contemporaneous issues such as the Vietnam War and the South American drug Wars

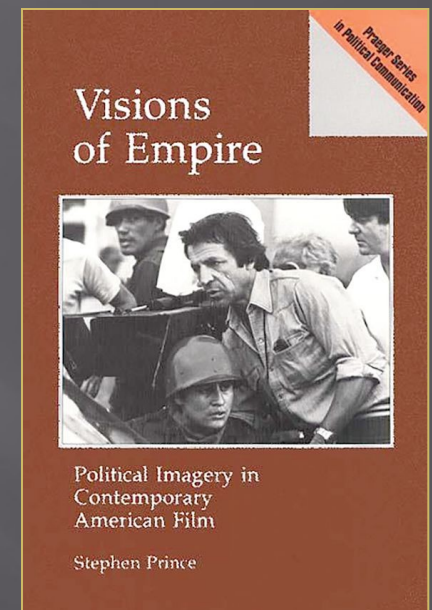
Films built around these topics contributed much to US audiovisual culture, through commercial success, critical attention, and imitation

The most culturally and industrially significant of these geopolitical trends was however the decade's Cold-War themed cycle of films

Like the *Backlash Cinema* we looked at last time, Cold War Cinema has been largely discussed as a mouthpiece of right-wing America

Stephen Prince offers the most detailed – and in academic circles – the most influential account of Hollywood’s 1980s Cold War Cinema

What themes and positions does Prince argue distinguished 1980s Cold-War Cinema?



A Reaganite Cinema Par Excellence

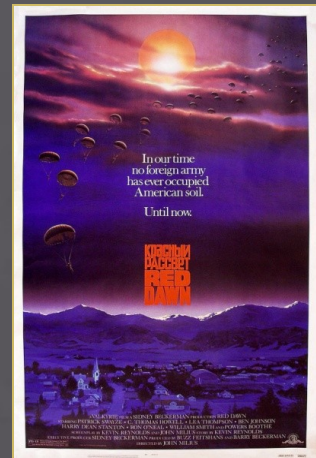
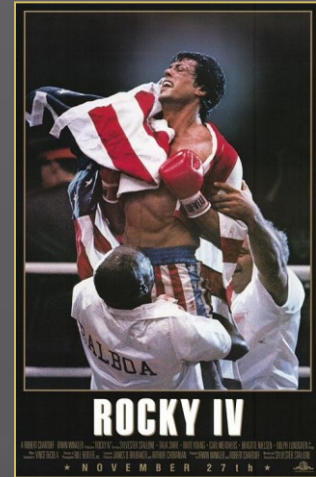
Prince argues that the films transpose the Manichean rhetoric of the Reagan Whitehouse onto the comic-book action format

He suggests they were hyper-nationalistic, bellicose, and anti-Soviet; celebrating US power reemerging on the global stage

American Superiority: This was articulated through Reactive militarism, capitalism, consumption, and hyper-masculinity

Soviet Evil: This was articulated by depicting the USSR as monolithic, hostile, totalitarian, militaristic, and imperialistic

The notion of a Soviet military threat sets apart these films from a 1940s Anti-Communist cycle Prince also discusses



A Pervasive, Enduring, Popularized Notion ...

www.bbc.com/culture/story/20141106-why-are-russians-always-bad-guys

THE REEL WORLD | 5 November 2014

Hollywood stereotypes: Why are Russians the bad guys?

Tom Brook | Film | Film industry | Hollywood | Politics | Popular culture

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(United Artists)

Hollywood often resorts to national stereotypes when portraying movie villains - but why would they want to alienate part of their audience? Tom Brook investigates.

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The Limiting Perspective of Hyper-Patriotic Action Movies

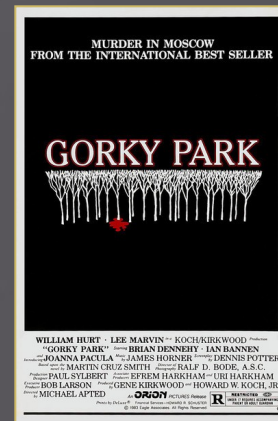
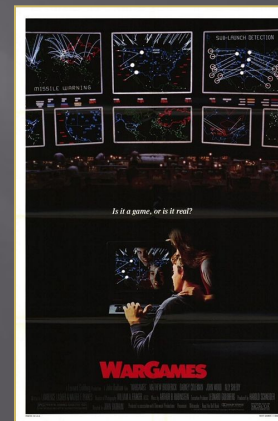
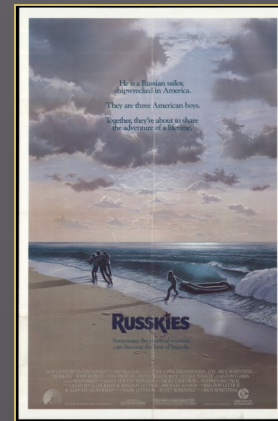
Like the feminists' views on "Backlash Cinema", Prince's work was wrongly received as holistic

I submit his analysis was characterized by cherry-picked examples and distorted readings thereof

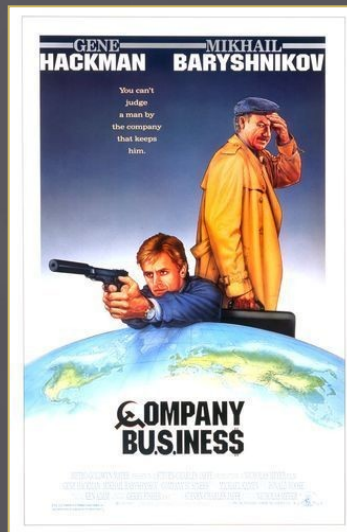
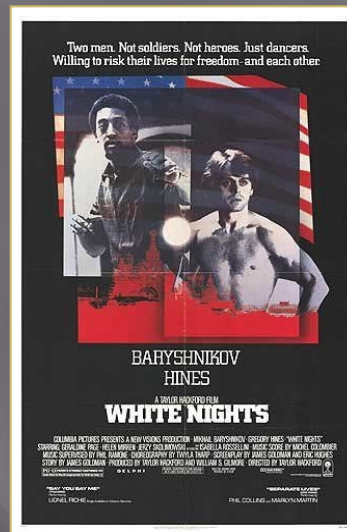
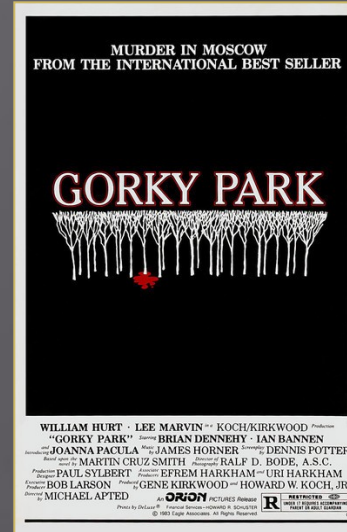
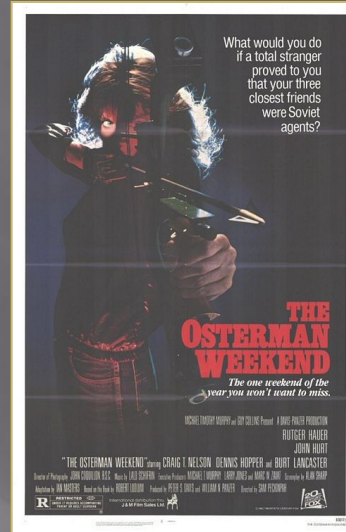
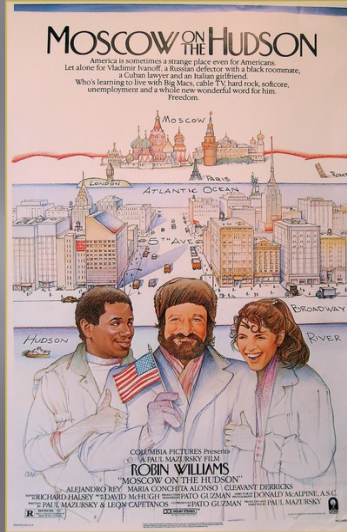
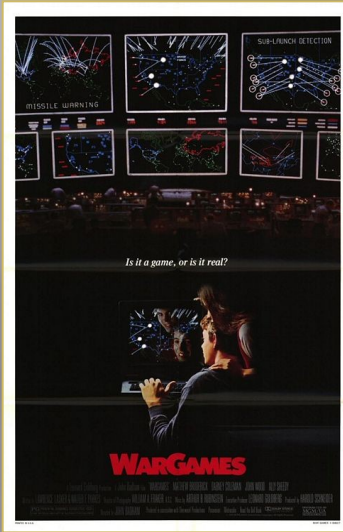
Rather than survey output then draw conclusions, Prince selects films he can make fit his argument

In so doing, he gives the erroneous impression of generically and thematically unilateral output

But Hollywood handled a range of films about the Cold War, that articulated many positions thereon



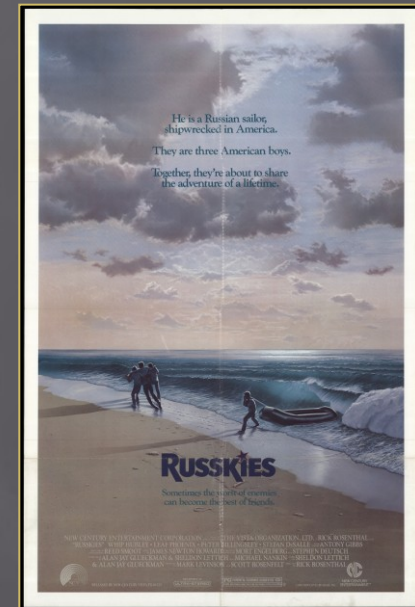
Cold War Cinema



Russkies (1987)

Despite being thematically relevant and culturally visible this film is conspicuously absent from Prince's work

1. How does this film depict Soviets?
2. How does this film depict Americans?
3. How does this film depict the American entertainment media?



Russkies: Just Like in Red Dawn?

Russkies offers more optimistic position on the Cold War, esp. the roles of US media, politicians, and citizens



It essentially represents a variation on E.T., replacing the beloved extra-terrestrial with a different sort of alien



It frames US media as incendiary propaganda spreading misinformation and promoting paranoid group-think



It advocates US-Soviet reconciliation – friendship even – albeit under “life-affirming” US consumer-capitalism

It also links anti-Soviet political and media conduct to that of flawed authority figures (especially fathers)



“The movie is about friendship (between U.S. kids and a Russian boy). It’s the antithesis of *Rambo*. It’s a perfect example of glasnost”.

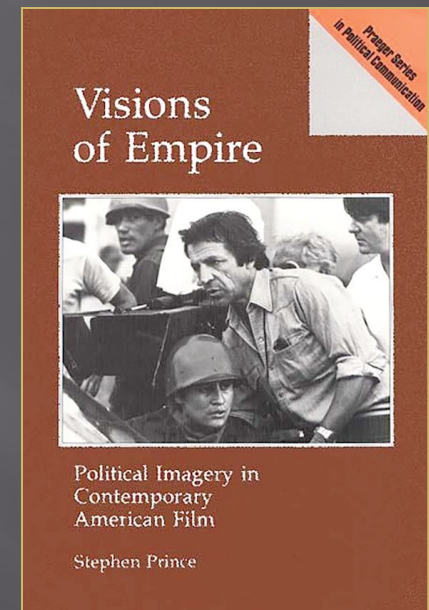
Russkies producer Stephen Deutsch.

Source: *Variety*, 1987.

Prince on *Rocky IV*

For Prince and others, this film is the epitome of Cold War Cinema as hawkish propaganda; it might behoove us to reconsider this view though

What does argue Prince about *Rocky IV*?



Rocky IV (1985)

1. How does this film depict Soviets?
2. How does this film depict Americans?
3. How does this film depict the American entertainment media?



Misremembering agency: “I *must* break”



'Mark Lawrenson, I will break you': Lawro's predictions v Dolph Lundgren

“Does the crowd understand? Is it East versus West or man against man?”

I submit this film has been grossly mischaracterized; it actually critiques cornerstones of Reagan America

It critiques technology as an infantilizing distraction or as dehumanizing phenomenon when weaponized

It also offers a damning critique of the manipulative nature of the media, on both sides of the iron curtain

In particular it critiques the media for politicizing entertainment (boxing), risking provoking a conflict

This implicates Hollywood, positioning this film as a denunciation of the Cold War cinema Prince describes



**President Reagan's Address to Congress on the
Geneva Summit at the US Capitol, 21 Nov 1985"
(The Day that *Rocky IV* Premiered)**

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OofADKCUgTE&t=1101s

**“One person conditioned to rule and control.
The media sells it and you live the role.”**

Prince choses not to – or fails to – understand Cold War Cinema in relation to the media culture of the 1980s

At this time, there was a massive public backlash against depicting violent fantasies of Soviet destruction

Countless public-sphere claims-makers denounced this as highly irresponsible and apt to provoke nuclear war

Hollywood’s Cold War cinema often echoed media that was critical of the US Hawkish Cold War politics

Crucially, the commercially successful cold war films – those inspiring imitation – were anti-war like *Wargames*



Reagan Posterboy or the most powerful leftist filmmaker of his generation?

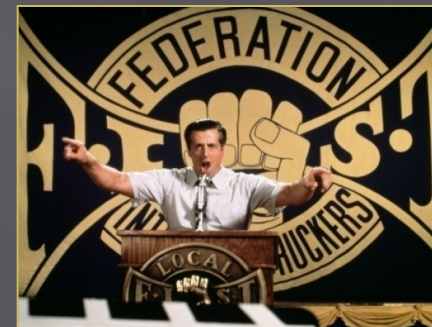
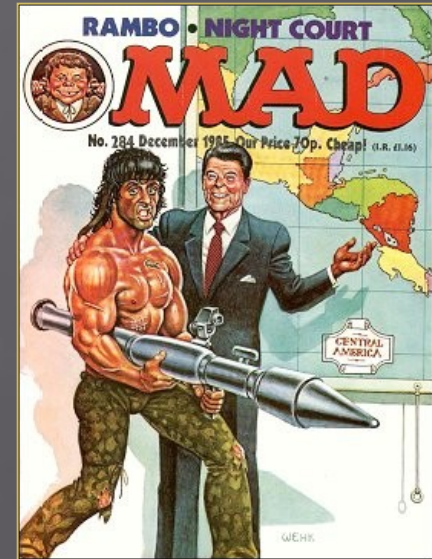
Rocky IV auteur Sylvester Stallone's public persona is often cited as evidence his films were pro-Reagan tracts

By the mid-1980s, Stallone was largely conflated with his Rambo character; at least one understanding of him

The image of the gun-toting Rambo was reproduced as a symbol of Reagan-era bellicosity, time after time ...

Less a powerless prop of rightwing ideologues, Stallone was in fact a smart, powerful, populist auteur filmmaker

His output tended to centralize downtrodden characters and vilify US institutions as corrupt and exploitative



F.I.S.T (1978) Trailer

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAndBxYrTBE>

Rocky IV: Contested Synchronic Reception

Agit-Prop: Incendiary, insensitive

“Americans are being brought up with the idea that you can only deal with a Russian with a gun”.

- Georgi A. Ivanov, Soviet Deputy Minister of Culture

“Even the biggest pacifist in the world is going to find himself shouting in the aisles”.

- Jack Curry, *USA Today*

Leftist Tract: Populist, constructive

“*[Rocky IV]* has less to do with nationalism than populism ... That’s not American war-nography”.

Anon., *New York Times*

“In this day of rapprochement with the Russians, *Rocky IV*’s ultimate message can only be contributive ... it’s one more small step for mankind”.

- Arthur Knight, *Hollywood Reporter*

The Writer-Director-Star's Perspective

“Rocky IV was pro-Russian”.

Sylvester Stallone, *New York Times*.

In Sum

A decade-spanning trend about Cold War topics represented Hollywood's most intense engagement with geopolitical issues of the 1980s

This Cold War cinema is understood by academics – and in media culture generally – as an extreme right-wing trend not unlike Backlash Cinema

As exemplified by Prince, the trend was widely condemned as Anti-Soviet, jingoistic, bellicose mouthpieces of the Reagan Whitehouse

However, these notions are undermined by analyses of Cold-War-themed films Prince overlooks, and by reconsidering the films he does examine

Many films promoted reconciliation and critiqued Reagan's America, in particular the politicization of entertainment like Cold War Cinema itself

Next Time...

We will reconsider Hollywood's most high-profile branding strategy of the 1980s...

Topic 3: High Concept

Reading: Wyatt "The Concept of High Concept"

Home Screenings: *Flashdance* (1983)
Gremlins (1984)

[Preparatory Questions on MS TEAMS and in the Syllabus]

Meeting: Thursday 24 October