

**American cinema in the USSR and Post-Communist Russia:
cultural influence in open and closed societies**

In the period of complications and antagonism between countries and governments, public diplomacy and its cultural programs become crucial. And in this regard films can be a very powerful and discreet public diplomacy tool capable of acting within foreign society. As Joseph Nye had said, ‘Pictures often convey values more powerfully than words’.¹

In this paper I would like to use the case study of American cinema diplomacy in the USSR and Russia to demonstrate how cultural influence correlate with phenomena of open or closed societies described by Karl Popper, and how they can work even in closed societies.

Popper defined an open society as a society “in which individuals are confronted with personal decision”, and a closed society as “the magical or tribal or collectivist society”.² For Popper, the USSR was a closed society. As for the post-Soviet Russia, its status as an open society is ambiguous. Nevertheless, in terms of access to cultural values and products, post-Soviet Russia allowed its citizens to be confronted with personal decisions which films they should or shouldn’t watch. Let’s see how the perception of American films by Soviet / Russian society altered in time together with political changes in this country.

During the Soviet period Hollywood became a tool of public diplomacy aimed at Soviet Society. In the summer of 1942 the US Embassy in the Soviet Union initiated a cinema information program that provided supplies of documentaries to the USSR³. Next year in 1943 the two countries signed an agreement regarding the mutual free exchange of documentaries and documentaries which became the legal basis for film exchanges. American Ambassador William Standley was an important contributor to this program and was a strong protagonist of the idea to

include fiction films into the program understanding their importance in creating a positive image of the US.⁴

The American government wasn't the only actor in the process of American films entering the USSR. American films studios represented by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (that was renamed to the Motion Pictures Association of America in 1945) had strong trade interest in gaining the Soviet market. With the fast development of television in the US and also as a result of the Paramount Decree that limited the rights of film studios, it became crucial for film producers to gain foreign markets.⁵ The Soviet Union with its large population and cinema industry devastated by the war was a perfect target. And in 1948 the Motion Pictures Association of America led by Eric Johnston started a round of negotiations with Sovexportfilm, a Soviet governmental agency responsible for foreign film trade.

The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art has an extensive collection of documents regarding the first round of negotiations. This round didn't succeed, because of several reasons, (economic, ideological and political character), the Soviet side terminated the negotiations.⁶ However, in 1958 due to the thaw politics led by Khrushchev, the USSR and the US signed the Agreement on Exchanges in the Cultural, Technical, and Educational Fields between the US and USSR which resulted in constant contact of American values with the Soviet people. Throughout the whole Soviet period American films did not leave Soviet screens. American film directors and actors were regular guests in the Moscow International Film festival,⁷ and Soviet representatives were in contact with their American colleagues.⁸ From 1940 to 1990 among 279 of the most popular foreign films there were 62 American films, each of them was seen by more than 20 million Soviet viewers.⁹

The popularity of American films in Soviet period can be explained by their light entertaining character and absence of direct propaganda. They were either films created especially for the USSR and expressing pro-Soviet sentiments, like early films “Mission to Moscow”, “The North Star” or “The Song of Russia”, or didn’t contain any political message at all. It is very difficult to analyze the efficiency of Hollywood as a public diplomacy tool in the USSR because there were no opinion polls concerning the perception of American films. Soviet press also tried to avoid writing about American culture or presented it negatively.¹⁰ The main Soviet magazine about cinema, Soviet Screen hardly wrote about American films in the 1950’s. The exception was only the films of Charlie Chaplin that were used to present and highlight negative sides of capitalist American society.¹¹ However, the attitude of the Soviet press significantly changed in the 1960’s, and we can find many articles without criticism of American society and even those defending and complementing the US and American cinema.¹²

However, analyzing the memoirs of Soviet people, mostly writers and journalists, concerning their experience with American cinema show us that the impact of American films were positive.

As author Yuriy Brokhin remembers in his article “America seen from Gorky street”, In the 1950’s Soviet school children admired heroes of American films more than heroes of Soviet patriotic films.¹³ By the 1970’s the movement called “statists” were formed, these were young people sympathizing American culture. Designer Andrey Vasilevskiy was one of them. He recalls that if he was suggested 100 countries to emigrate to, he would choose only the US. America was his romantic dream that helped survive.¹⁴ Journalist and writer Petr Vail also described his childhood and how amazed he was with American westerns such as “The Magnificent Seven” by John Sturges and “Stagecoach” by John Ford.¹⁵ Famous Russian writer

Vasily Aksyonov remembers that while being a child, he watched every American western more than 10 times, and then replicated the films plots playing with his friends.¹⁶ Journalists V.M. Peskov and B.G. Strelnikov visited the US and wrote a book about their impressions. With nostalgia and adoration they recollect how while being children they watched American cartoons “Bambie” and “Sleeping Beauty” by Walt Disney.¹⁷

Of course, these are just the opinion of several writers, but they were ordinary Soviet children, and very probably other Soviet school children felt the same. The representative of the American Embassy in Moscow Frederick C. Barghoorn who interviewed a number of Soviet citizens in order to find out their opinion about the film “Mission to Moscow”, mentioned, that thanks to American films, ordinary Soviet people became the Achilles’ heel for the Communist party.¹⁸

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Soviet population received an unlimited access to American films through video-cassettes with B-movies that were distributed illegally as video-piracy. All this resulted in growth of the number of American films shown in Russia. In April 1991 among 313 films only 22 films were Soviet films, and among foreign films the majority of them were American¹⁹. The peak of American cinema on the Russian market was in 1994 when 215 American films were shown in Russian cinemas.²⁰

At the same time, these were mostly B-movies that the majority of Americans didn’t even hear about, according to American scholar Denise J. Youngblood: *The Beach Girls*, *Hot Target*, *The Nine Deaths of the Ninja*.²¹ This resulted in the situation where cinema didn’t help public diplomacy anymore but in fact worked against it.

In the 1990’s Soviet periodicals radically changed their negative opinion about American cinema. In the 1990’s the Soviet Screen, rebranded as Screen, published a big number of positive

articles about American films, actors, film directors. Only in 1995 were there articles about Elizabeth Taylor,²² Whoopi Goldberg,²³ Kathy Bates,²⁴ George Lucas,²⁵ Bruce Willis,²⁶ Jean-Claude Van Damme,²⁷ Arnold Schwarzenegger,²⁸ and Charlie Chaplin.²⁹

In the 1990's and the beginning of the 2000's were marked with changes from pro-American enthusiasm to anti-Americanism. In the 1990's the attitudes of Russians towards the US were contradictory. In the March 1997 Centre for International Sociological Research realized an opinion poll among Russians. 73 % of respondents replied that they would like to visit the US, and 22 % would like to live in this country. 24 % of Russians said that they like Americans, while 25 % gave the opposite answer. For the question "Would you like to marry an American?" 22 % of Russian men answered "Yes", while 51% gave the negative answer. As for Russian women, 65 % of them would like to marry an American. As for the cultural side of the question, for the question "Should we copy American life style?" 54 % of Russians replied "Yes" and only 26 % said "No". 33 % supported Americanization of the world, and 41 % were against it.³⁰

However, by the end of the 2000's, anti-American spirits dramatically increased. The results of the opinion polls realized by Gallup, Inc. and published in 2009, show that from 2006 to 2008, the year when the relations between the US and Russia became more complicated because of the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia, the share of Russians disapproving the US increased from 55 to 57 %, and in 2007 this indicator achieved a record 63 % mark (*Annex 1*).

Current period is marked by increasing "New Cold War". We are witnessing a paradoxically contradictory situation when the raising anti-Americanism is accompanied by a growing interest in American films. The graphs in *Annexes 2* and *3* demonstrate these trends.

These graphs are based on the opinion poll among Russians about their attitude towards the US published by Gallop, Inc. in July 2014,³¹ and the data of Metropolitan Media about the number of viewers of American films in Russia and CIS (except for Ukraine) on the first weekend of each year from 2008 to 2015 (which is the most profitable time for cinemas due to the New Year vacations in these countries).³² The graphs show that while the opinion of Russians about America decreases, their interest in American films is growing, this phenomenon that took place during the Soviet period as well. While there is no official opinion polls about what Russians think about American films, in Russian social media one can find many reviews and questionnaires on this topic. Thus, one of the communities devoted to cinema on the most popular Russian social media site vk.com contains an interesting opinion poll which suggests one simple question: “Which films are better: Russian or American?” Among 1036 participants of the poll 780 voted for the American films and only 190 for the Russian ones (*Annex 4*).

We see that in the history of the relations between Russian audience and American cinema, the more difficult were the relations between Russia and the US, the more interest Russians had in American cinema. The stronger official anti-American propaganda was, the more Russian people wanted to watch American films. The history can be a good lesson for the new war of ideas. The current reaction of the Russian government to American film imports shockingly reminds us of what happened in the USSR during the 1940s, when the Soviet government realized that American films might represent a threat, but could not completely abolish them given their importance to the Soviet people. In November 2014, amid the Russian–American media war about the Ukrainian crises, Russian film director Yuri Kara suggested introducing a 50% quota for Russian films in Russian cinema in response to economic sanctions against Russia. Earlier, at the beginning of 2014, the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir

Medinsky also suggested introducing quotas for Russian films. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that it ‘would be wrong to limit our customers in the goods that they would like to use, including quasi-goods such as film’.³³ This free access that American cinema has to Russian society represents a very good opportunity for American public diplomacy in the era of “New Cold War”.

*Annex 1. Russians views of U.S. Leadership*³⁴

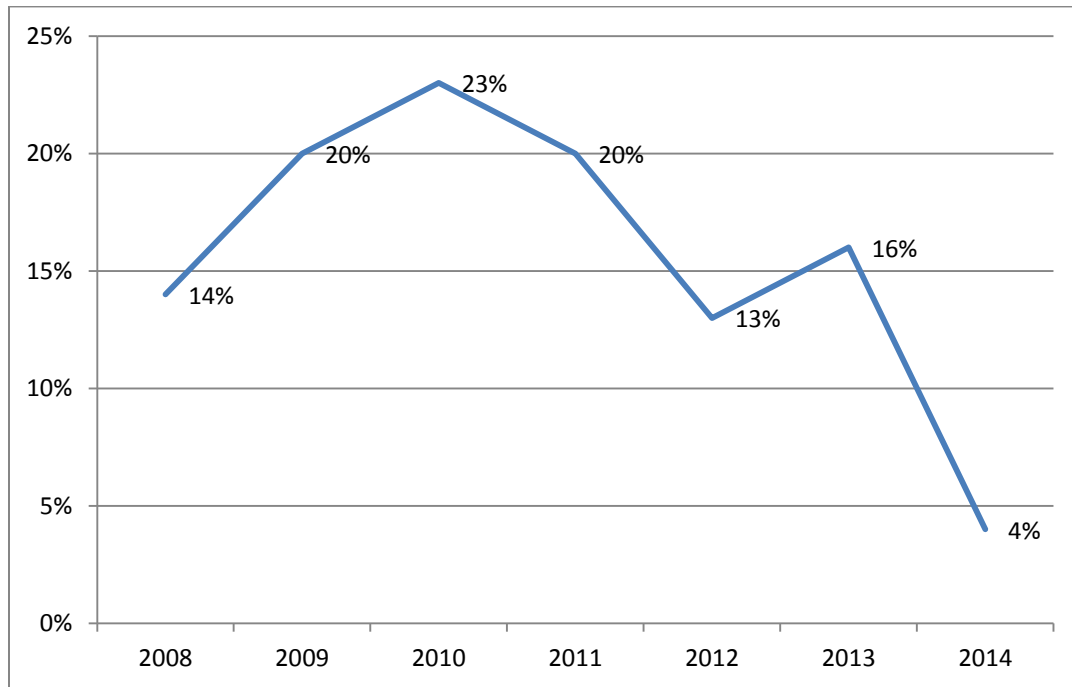
Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of the USA?

■ Approve ■ Disapprove ■ Don't know/Refused

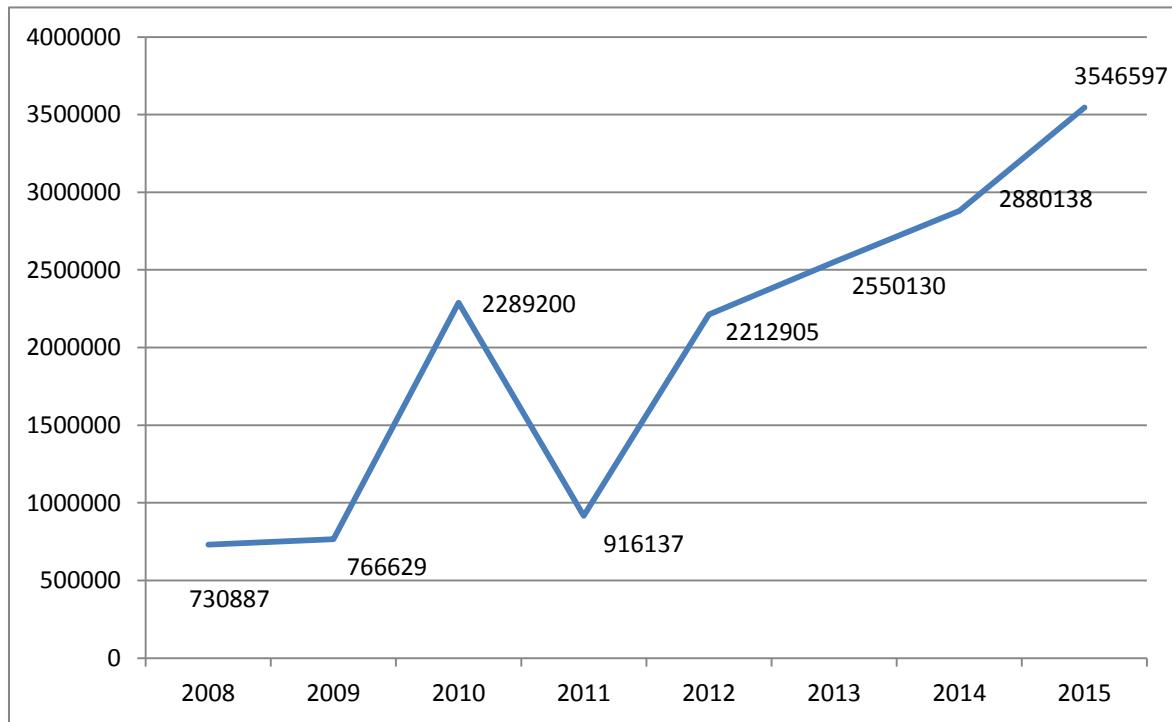


GALLUP POLL

Annex 2. Russians approving of US leadership (2008 – 2014)³⁵



Annex 3. Number of the Russia's and CIS countries' viewers (excluding the Ukraine) of American films (dubbed to Russian language) for the first weekend of each year (2008 – 2015)³⁶



Annex 4. Which films are better: Russian or American?³⁷

[ОПРОС] Какие фильмы лучше русские или американские?

Кирилл Уксусников

какие фильмы лучше русские или американски?



¹ Nye, J., 2004. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs, p. 47.

² Popper K., 1945. *Open Society and Its Enemies*. London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., p. 152.

³ Bennet, T., 2001. Culture, Power, and Mission to Moscow: Film and Soviet-American Relations during World War II. *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2), p. 518.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 511.

⁵ *Ibid*, 513.

⁶ See: "Record of conversation between the manager of Sovexportfilm comrade Sakontikov N.I. and a representative of MPAA/Motion Pictures Association of America in Europe Kanturek," 20 July 1948, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 1; "Record of conversation between the manager of Sovexportfilm comrade Sakontikov N.I. and a representative of MPAA/Motion Pictures Association of America in Europe Kanturek," 8 September 1949, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 13 – 17; "Record of conversation between the deputy manager of Sovexportfilm Moskovsky and a representative of MPAA/Motion Pictures Association of America in Europe Kanturek," 10 August 1949, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 18; "Record of conversation between the manager of Sovexportfilm Sakontikov and a representative of MPAA/Motion Pictures Association of America in Europe Kanturek," 10 August 1949, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 20 - 21; "Letter of the President of Motion Pictures Association of America Eric Johnson to the Deputy Minister of Cinematography of the USSR V.F. Ryazanov," 26 August 1949, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 25 - 26; "Informational note regarding the negotiations between Sovexportfilm and representatives of the Motion Pictures Association of America Maas and Kanturek, signed by Deputy Manager of Sovexportfilm Moskovsky," 28 December 1949, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 210, List 124; "Informational note to the Deputy Minister of Cinematography, signed by Deputy Manager of Sovexportfilm Sinitsin," 28 June 1950, in Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Literaturi I Iskusstva, Fond 2456, Opis' 4, Edinitsa khraneniya 267, List 21 – 22.

⁷ *Moscow International Film Festival. Chronicles. 1959 - 2012*. Available from: <http://www.moscowfilmfestival.ru/miff36/archives/?year=1989> [Accessed 23 April 2015].

⁸ Kapterev, S., 2009. Illusionary spoils: Soviet attitudes toward American cinema during the early Cold War. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10 (4), 786.

⁹ *Filmy po godam. 1895 – 2013*. Available from:

http://www.vseokino.ru/index.php/%D0%9A%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%8F:%D0%A4%D0%B8%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BC%D1%8B_%D0%BF%D0%BE_%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BC [Accessed 23 April 2015]

¹⁰ *Kakie Amerikanskie filmi mi uvidim. 1958. Sovetskiy Ekran*, 23, 16.

¹¹ Avenerius G., 1958. Charlie Chaplin snova na nahsem ekrane. *Sovetskiy Ekran*, 11, 10 – 11.

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- ¹² Rozhdenie obraza, 1965. *Sovetskiy Ekran*, 1, 14 – 15; Interview with Steve McQueen, 14, 1; Dmitriev V., 1975. Prostie Istini Johna Forda. *Sovetskiy Ekran*, 7, 4; Prekrasnaya Ledi Hollywooda, 1975. *Sovetskiy Ekran*, 15, 16 – 17.
- ¹³ Brokhin, Y., 1976. America seen from Gorky street. *The Nation*, 12 June 1976, p. 721.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Vail, P., 2006. *Geniy Mesta*. Moscow: KoLibri, p. 6.
- ¹⁶ Kapterev, S., 2009. Illusionary spoils: Soviet attitudes toward American cinema during the early Cold War. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 10 (4), 793.
- ¹⁷ Peskov, V., Strelnikov, B., 1977. *Zemlya za Okeanom*. Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiya, p. 190.
- ¹⁸ Bennet, T., 2001. Culture, Power, and Mission to Moscow: Film and Soviet-American Relations during World War II. *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2), p. 518.
- ¹⁹ Youngblood, D.J., 1992. ‘Americanitis’: American Film Influences in Russia. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 19 (4), 153.
- ²⁰ “A distant glow in the west.” *Economist*. London, England] 22 Mar. 1997: 56
- ²¹ Youngblood, D.J., 1992. ‘Americanitis’: American Film Influences in Russia. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 19 (4), 153.
- ²² Elizabeth Taylor ne vezet, 1995. *Ekran*, 1, 11.
- ²³ Whoopi Goldberg – prisluga, 1995. *Ekran*, 1, 22.
- ²⁴ Kathy Bates ne mozhet sigrat plokho, 1995. *Ekran*, 1, 28.
- ²⁵ Vladimirov A., Jeorge Lucas: “Zritel imeet pravo smotret to, chto emu khochetsya,” 1995. *Ekran*, 2, 32 – 33.
- ²⁶ Bruce Willis – vooruzhenniy kinoman, 1995. *Ekran*, 3, 40.
- ²⁷ Fiks S., Zhenshchini v ego zhizni, 1995. *Ekran*, 4, 16 – 20.
- ²⁸ Schwarzenegger v interesnom polozhenii, 1995. *Ekran*, 4, 30 – 31.
- ²⁹ Babushkini skazki, 1995. *Ekran*, 7, 30 – 31.
- ³⁰ “A distant glow in the west.” *Economist*. London, England] 22 Mar. 1997: 56.
- ³¹ Gallup, Inc., 2014. Russian Approval of Putin Soars to Highest Level in Years. Available from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/173597/russian-approval-putin-soars-highest-level-years.aspx> [Accessed 23 April 2015]
- ³² Metropolitan Media. Bulletin kinoprokatchika. Box-office SNG. Available from: www.kinometro.ru/box [Accessed 23 April 2015]
- ³³ *Putin Protiv Zapreta Amerikanskogo Kino v Rossii*. 2014. BBC [online]. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2014/11/141118_russia_american_films_putin [Accessed 5 January 2015].
- ³⁴ Gallup, Inc., 2009. Americans Sour on Russia; Russians Unsure About U.S. Available from: http://www.gallup.com/poll/121424/Americans-Sour-Russia-Russians-Unsure.aspx?utm_source=Russia&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=tiles [Accessed 23 April 2015]
- ³⁵ Gallup, Inc., 2014. Russian Approval of Putin Soars to Highest Level in Years. Available from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/173597/russian-approval-putin-soars-highest-level-years.aspx> [Accessed 23 April 2015]
- ³⁶ Metropolitan Media. Bulletin kinoprokatchika. Box-office SNG. Available from: www.kinometro.ru/box [Accessed 23 April 2015]
- ³⁷ V kino. Community on social media vk.com. Opinion poll: which cinema is better – Russian or American? Available from: https://vk.com/topic-12332522_23141527?offset=320 [Accessed 23 April 2015]