

Warnography: Hollywood Cold War Cinema, Critical Hostility, and *Rocky IV* (1985)

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“During the last few years, the film industry has resorted to using U.S. versus Soviet nationalism to sell movie tickets”, opined Carol Basset of *Rocky IV*; “The Anti-Soviet, pro-American flavor of this and other films like it, cannot but damage U.S.–Soviet relations (1986: 14). Denouncing writer-director-star Sylvester Stallone’s boxing sequel as hawkish trash liable to inflame geopolitical tensions, this *Chicago Tribune* writer exemplified the period’s dominant US popular critical perspective on 1980s Cold War Cinema.

The outrage expressed by Bassett and others notwithstanding, Cold War Cinema occupies a reductive location in histories of Hollywood of the 1980s. Scholars have tended to distill this decade-spanning production trend to a national cinema, one whose projection of hyper-patriotism and Anti-Sovietism supposedly reflected the conservative values of American filmmakers, politicians, and audiences (see Prince 1992: 49-80; Shaw 2007; Shaw & Youngblood 2010). Such a position has been reinforced time and again in American popular culture. For example, a 2022 episode of the animated series *South Park* (1997–), entitled “Back to the Cold War”, depicted a fifty-something’s retreat into the comforting binaries these films offer him, upon learning Russia has invaded Ukraine. And, voiceover narration to a 2015 episode of the ABC sitcom *The Goldbergs* (2013–2023) reminisced: “Back in the ‘80s, America had one clear enemy: The Russians. It was the age of the Cold War, capitalism versus communism, Reagan versus Gorbachev, Rocky Versus that ‘roided-out monster who killed Apollo Creed [...]”.

The largely uncontested diachronic construction of 1980s Cold War Cinema as nationalistic comfort viewing – shorn of the disgust of Basset and others – remains something of an exception to histories of American cinematic relations to the Eastern Bloc however. After all, historians have long-since relativized Hollywood’s reputed institutional antagonisms toward this region, revealing, among other things, its productive working relations with Communist Party elites and its Communist-friendly branding strategies at local film festivals (Blahova 2010; Nowell 2023). They have also shown that Hollywood’s earlier forays into Cold War-themed output took up a range of positions on East-West relations. Tony Shaw has, for instance, detailed how scenes of Americans and Soviets cooperating on the screen were intended to promote similar collaborations behind the scenes on a planned US-USSR coproduction of 1966’s *The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming* (2010). And, Mark Jancovich has argued that the sci-fi invasion

narratives of the 1950s – traditionally read as allegories of Soviet attacks – often mediated concerns about the homeland, including fears of increasing conformity (1996).

Under these circumstances, I would like to suggest that a reconsideration of Hollywood's 1980s Cold War Cinema is both pertinent and overdue. This article therefore seeks to contribute to such an endeavor by expanding the terms under which this prominent production trend may be understood as a significant component of American popular culture. Derived from a far-reaching examination of the US popular press of the mid-to-late 1980s, I argue that journalists and their sources consistently presented the aforementioned *Rocky IV* as perhaps the single most troubling release of its day. The first section of the article details the sociocultural and political developments underpinning this critical hostility, the second the mechanics of the film's elitist critical devaluation, the third how its politics were distorted and demonized. In so doing, the article invites us to reconsider a principle rubric under which the Cold War-themed output of the 1980s has been situated: Reaganite Cinema. This critical category comprises films from around the period deemed to advance a conservative vision of a resurgent America built on neoliberalism, nostalgia, family values, masculinity, and interventionist foreign policies (see Britton 1986; Wood 1986; see also Needham 2016). By concentrating on what they see as the promotion of these themes in commercially successful examples, scholars have given the erroneous impression that such fare was universally embraced stateside. However, by shifting focus to its popular critical reception there, it soon becomes clear that these traits – whether an accurate reflection of the films or otherwise – were vociferously rejected in some quarters.

The positions of Carol Bassett (and others) highlight a tension between synchronic and diachronic understandings of arguably the most prominent intersection of American popular culture and political discourse of the day. For, although the synchronic popular reception of Cold War Cinema like *Rocky IV* was characterized by similar thematic readings to its diachronic academic reception, the significance journalists assigned thereto was quite different. Granted, both camps may have concluded that such films advanced a right-wing vision of American social, economic, ethical, and military superiority over the Eastern Bloc. Yet, academic perspectives remained interpretative, neutrally casting the films as wish-fulfilment fantasies for a post-malaise America requiring national healing via projections of geopolitical mastery, rather than considering their potential real-world impact (Prince 1992: 49-80; Shaw 2007; Shaw & Youngblood 2010). By contrast, the press coverage examined below rested on a form of participatory democracy rooted not just in the definitions and interpretations characterizing later scholarship, but also a third facet genre theorists recognize as central to the social construction of media categories: evaluation – which is to say the perceived virtues or lack thereof of a given format (see for example Mittel

2001: 8-9). The US popular critical backlash against *Rocky IV* would ultimately provide the popular press with a stage upon which to consider how responsibly to dramatize East-West relations. Yet, by condemning the film for threatening such relations – through its supposed exploitativeness, xenophobia, jingoism, and bellicosity – American journalists effectively overwrote the film’s makers’ own efforts to advance this exact position.

Cultural Hierarchies, Controversies, and the “Spirit of Geneva”

The American press coverage of *Rocky IV* was underpinned by three major sociocultural developments which together enabled this film credibly – although not necessarily accurately – to be situated within the variety of cultural categories discussed below. One of these facilitated the relegation of output to the lower strata of cultural hierarchies, another indicated the expediency of critical outrage, and a third suggested denouncing Cold War-themed entertainment supported a political position that journalists would be prudent publicly to endorse.

Patterns of industrial reorganization and critical reevaluation catalyzed the relocation of films boasting relatively prestigious qualities into a conceptual media ghetto. As Eric Schaefer explains, American audiovisual culture previously distinguished an imagined mainstream synonymous with Hollywood from an industrially, aesthetically, and qualitatively balkanized “exploitation” sector (1999). The former posited a glamorous, wealthy industry generating a polished product of conformity and conservativeness for middle-class patrons; the latter cash-strapped hucksters peddling salacious, violent, profane cheapies to marginalized audiences. These distinctions were eroded in the years prior to the release of *Rocky IV* after both the major Hollywood studios and cash-strapped independents diversified their output. Where the majors bankrolled taboo-busting films like *Cruising* (1980), lowbrow specialists released upscale output reminiscent of Hollywood fare, like *Teen Wolf* (1985). This convergence transformed the idea of exploitation cinema from an alternative to an imagined mainstream into a gratuitous caricature thereof (Nowell 2016: 110); understandably so, given both invoked the profit-seeking, formula, and sensation which stood binarily opposed to the purported authenticity, autonomy, and alternativeness of elevated culture (Newman 2009).

The intersection of these hitherto distinct conceptual fields exerted a significant impact on the US critical establishment. Again, this situation is unsurprising given media commentators routinely draw connections to, and distinctions from, media texts in order to rationalize their biases – elevating and denigrating output as they do. This practice is, of course, even more pronounced when stakeholders claim such output threatens mores or public order, particularly when counterarguments risk undermining said claims. In the years before *Rocky IV* opened, outrage over motion picture content had

reached a fever pitch in American audiovisual culture amid protests from activists, journalists, and politicians (see e.g. Prince 2000: 341–369; Lyons 1997). The main objects of their hostility were lowbrow Hollywood releases rendered visible by prominent marketing campaigns, wide bookings, and significant uptake. Examples included slasher movies like *Friday the 13th* (1980), children’s horror like *Poltergeist* (1982), and women-in-danger thrillers like *Body Double* (1984) (see Antunes 2017; Prince 2000: 353–356). These films tended to destabilize the class distinctions that had previously quarantined exploitation cinema in subaltern arenas of the popular imagination like drive-ins and grindhouses. Journalists consequently summoned the migration of such fare into quotidian locations *à la* suburban multiplexes and video rental outlets as evidence of a symbolic threat to middle-class values. With the Chicago reviewers Gene Siskel & Roger Ebert achieving national celebrity status on the back of the aforementioned controversies, the incentives for journalists to produce activist criticism of this sort were profound (Nowell 2012: 74–75).

The very day *Rocky IV* premiered, an epochal geopolitical shift encouraged stakeholders to direct their critical outrage at Cold War-themed media. On the 25th of November 1985, US President Ronald Reagan addressed Congress about culture’s roles in deescalating the Cold War. Returning from his first summit with the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva, Switzerland, Reagan emphasized that cultural exchanges would bring the superpowers closer together, eventually leading to a reduction in their nuclear arsenals. “We’ve concluded a new agreement designed to bring the best of America’s artists and academics to the Soviet Union”, he announced; “this agreement will also expand the opportunities for Americans to experience the Soviet peoples’ rich cultural heritage, because their artists and academics will be coming here” (Reagan Library). Reagan’s belief that screen entertainment shaped perceptions of East-West relations had evidently crystallized in 1983 when he tempered his view on nuclear weapons having viewed *The Day After* (1983), a disaster film about a Soviet assault on small-town America (see Hänni 2016). The emphasis he newly placed on media’s potential to enlighten and connect populations suggested that some output was anathematic to these goals. By concluding that cultural exchanges would “break down stereotypes, build friendships, and frankly provide alternatives to propaganda”, Reagan effectively designated media trading in Cold-War caricature and conflict an impediment to global security (*ibid.*). Sentiments of this sort rendered all but the most unequivocally glasnost-inflected of output vulnerable to charges of jeopardizing peace for profits. Circumstances of this sort in turn threatened to implicate those who seemed sympathetic to such fare. Appearing at odds to the “Spirit of Geneva” was so undesirable that the television station ABC had postponed its production of a mini-series about a Soviet invasion of the US, entitled *Amerika* (1987), following requests from the Kremlin (Doyle 1986: C22). With remarkable speed and consistency,

journalists showcased their contributions to the reconciliatory ambitions of Geneva by casting their voices as alternatives to the “propaganda” of which Reagan warned. Whether sincerely or strategically, they invoked prominent releases as foils against which to position themselves. Standing with progress and hope in this manner typically involved reimagining such counterweights as the lowest of lowbrow culture.

Exploitation Cinema

Via collective elitism, journalists maneuvered *Rocky IV* into the newly constructed cinematic lowbrow to prevent this particular media text from being received as a serious condemnation of media warmongering akin to their own offerings. The oft-overlooked satirical dimensions of the *Rocky* series derived from its use of a content-tailoring strategy characterized by oscillations between detached irony and emotional sincerity, now termed metamodernism (Van Den Akker & Vermuelen 2017). Though typically associated with the twenty-first-century, metamodern cinema was already being made in the 1970s, as exemplified by Hal Ashby’s bittersweet political satire *Being There* (1979). The *Rocky* films employed this approach by pairing sensitive depictions of its eponymous hero’s personal struggles and biting criticism of the media’s role in both his mental wellbeing and that of those around him. The first film combined an uplifting tale of a depressed outsider rediscovering his sense of self-worth through romance and professional dedication, and a sober indictment of the impact of commercial entertainment on below-the-line talent. *Rocky* may well be remembered as feelgood cinema *par excellence* (Brown 2014: 277); but, the film also depicts its eponymous underdog being manipulated into a publicity stunt that ends in his defeat on the Bicentennial Independence Day of 1976. Similarly, *Rocky IV* paired a storyline about its newly demoralized southpaw regaining his self-esteem – this time against a Soviet fighter – and a sustained denunciation of the politicization of entertainment during the Cold War. As I have elucidated this point elsewhere (Forthcoming), I shall limit my discussion here to a necessarily brief yet hopefully instructive sketch. *Rocky IV* depicted media agents on both sides of the Iron Curtain repeatedly inflaming East-West relations by imbuing Balboa’s motives with geopolitical import, when in reality he seeks redemption for his culpability in another fighter’s death. Rocky blames himself for not throwing in the towel at a critical juncture in the bout, leading him to fight the Soviet boxer as a means of pursuing personal redemption by processing his grief and guilt. Given this series used the Rocky-character’s travails to allegorize Stallone’s celebrity, the fourth film’s critique of the politicization of entertainment reads as calculated, reflexive denunciation of real-world media pressures and amorality. In short, as a condemnation of the inflammatory excesses of *some of the* Cold War cinema of the period (ibid).

To foreclose the possibility that *Rocky IV* would be read in this way, journalists portrayed its production as comparable to the crass opportunism reputed to characterize the exploitation sector. This strategy invited readers to divorce the film from a cinematic middlebrow congruent with sociopolitical engagement, and instead situate it in a “vacuum where satire and dramatized political analysis once flourished” (Matthews 1986a: 1). Little was therefore made of *Rocky IV*’s status as an auteur piece tracible to a respected contribution to the much-vaunted, left-leaning Hollywood Renaissance of the late 1960s and 1970s (King 2002: 11–48). Rather, journalists cited the film’s sequel-status as evidence of an apparent creative exhaustion characterizing its assembly. “This was the year that Hollywood dropped all pretensions toward art and openly declared that movies are practically pure business”, romantically declared Michael Blown of the *Boston Globe*. “How bankrupt the movie industry must be”, he continued, “when two of the biggest hits of the year starred Sylvester Stallone either murdering or bludgeoning foreigners?” (1985: A1). Lewis Grizzard of the *Orlando Sentinel* went as far as to link *Rocky IV* to a monumental human tragedy. “This thing is second only to AIDS in terms of harmful epidemics”, he coldly proclaimed; “sequels will beget sequels and then beget them some more. *Rocky* movies will come to be known as the longest unpleasant experience in history” (1985: A23).

Journalists also routinely suggested that *Rocky IV* exhibited the textual hallmarks of exploitation cinema. Claims of the film’s anti-intellectualism abounded, with Jack Matthews of the *Los Angeles Times* dismissing it as “simple-minded” and “moronic” (1986b: 1). Especially pronounced were suggestions that it relied upon a similar degree of formula to exploitation films. *Time* lamented “[t]he scheme of *Rocky IV* is numbingly familiar”, the *Philadelphia News* complained it “repeats every blessed ingredient that went over in the first three editions”, and the aforementioned Roger Ebert insisted “this movie is the bottom of the barrel [...] this movie is absolutely formula” (Schickel 1985: 110; Baltake 1985: 39; *At the Movies* 1985). Journalists often turned the blue-collar aspects of its writer-director-star’s public persona against the film, insinuating that the purported intellectual limitations of his brand of populism prevented a considered, informed reflection on complex topics like geopolitics. Where the *Wall Street Journal* stressed his involvement meant “we are not discussing high art”, John Bloom – writing under his exploitation aficionado persona of Joe Bob Briggs – jokily described *Rocky IV* as “the most sensitive and intelligent movie about nuclear war ever directed by Sylvester Stallone” (Anon. 1985: 1; Briggs 1985: 31).

Journalists supported their claims about *Rocky IV*’s low cultural standing by caricaturing the composition and conduct of its audiences. Several stated that they had witnessed firsthand how moviegoers responded to the film with visceral outbursts reminiscent more of schlocky horror movies than serious political drama. Such claims positioned *Rocky IV* as an example of what Linda Williams dubbed “body genres”; formats whose low prestige derives from

provoking involuntary physical reactions over reflective engagement (1991; see also for example Barker 2009). Even though the film thematized specifically adult-oriented topics like aging, obsolescence, and the politicization of entertainment, some critics juvenilized it. An aghast Jay Boyar of the *Orlando Sentinel* compared screenings to children's parties, lamenting "[k]ids are running up and down the aisle" (1985: E1). Others summoned classist portraits of a rabble roused. Mike McGrady of *Newsday* dismissed patrons of *Rocky IV* as "screaming, whistling, applauding fans who aren't inclined to be what you'd call overly critical" (1985: 93). He even compared the film to an attraction whose theatrical confrontations between All-American heroes and Russian villains provoked notoriously animated reactions among a fanbase of children and blue-collar southerners. "If there's nothing good going on at the wrestling arena tonight", he mused, "get right on over to see *Rocky IV*" (ibid.). Summoning audiences deemed low in cultural capital, alongside charges of crass commerciality and creative exhaustion, laid the rhetorical foundation upon which was built a denunciation of the film's politics; or, at least one particular vision thereof.

Warmongery

The popular critical reception of *Rocky IV*'s politics was undergirded by an Otherizing strategy used during an earlier high-profile US critical backlash. Half a decade before *Rocky IV* opened, American journalists had attacked the women-in-danger thriller *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and a spate of similar films. In a struggle over propriety of progressive alarm-raising, they lambasted such fare for the very misogyny its makers had sought to decry through their tales of sexist misfits menacing likeable, admirable women (see Wood 1983). Similarly, journalists charged *Rocky IV* with the very politicization of Cold-War-themed entertainment the film systematically condemned (see Nowell Forthcoming), thereby silencing competition for American hearts and minds.

Journalists advanced their denunciations of *Rocky IV*'s purported politics by aligning it with acknowledged right-wing fare. This practice typically located the film within a selective vision of the period's Cold War Cinema. In reality, this trend articulated myriad perspectives on East-West relations, from the anti-nuclearism of *Wargames* (1983) and critiques of US race relations in *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984) to the indictments of propagandizing in *Red Dawn* (1984). Journalists sidestepped such nuances however, instead distilling the trend to a mythical essence derived from their own claims of hawkishness. "[T]he American film industry in 1985 turned up the heat on the Cold War", wrote the aforementioned Gene Siskel in the *Chicago Tribune*, "offering gung-ho, anti-Communist entertainments in virtually every genre" (1985: 20). Journalists consistently drew parallels to *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (1985), a critically reviled Stallone action movie about the rescue of American soldiers from Vietnam. "Rambo is really Rocky as an angry prisoner of war", opined Arthur Murphy; "[b]oth series basically

involve the same character” (cited in Stark 1987: 1D). Journalists also compared *Rocky IV* to postwar output, including several hyperpatriotic tracts Hollywood companies released to counter charges of leftist infiltration of the industry levelled by the House Un-American Activities Committee. “One can’t help but compare the ‘new wave’ of the ‘80s with the alien invasion and anti-communist movies of the 1950s”, wrote the *Chicago Tribune*’s Lewis Beale (1986: 4). “*Rocky IV*”, noted Ryan Desmond of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “[is a film] Sen. Joseph McCarthy would have loved” (1985b: 12).

Such claims enabled the press more convincingly to decry *Rocky IV*’s depiction of Soviets as an extreme manifestation of representational practices deemed emblematic of 1980s Cold War Cinema generally. This step was evidently seen to be necessary because the film actually denationalizes villainy by condemning media warmongers on both sides of the Iron Curtain, especially American sports media and politburo propagandists (see Nowell Forthcoming). Yet, rather than address these complications, journalists employed evocative essentializing rhetoric, branding the film among others a “commie-baiting workout tape” and an “orgy of Commie-bashing” (Baltake 1985: 39; Desmond 1985a: C1). Among the more elaborated critiques, Sheila Benson of the *Los Angeles Times* claimed “*Rocky IV* says that Soviets are simplistic animals, incapable of loyalty or of decent human behavior”, and the aforementioned Carol Basset insisted it led audiences “to scorn, pity and demean the Russian people and their government” (1985: 1; 1986: 14). Journalists also gave a platform to both US and Soviet citizens who expressed such views. Phyllis Coons of the *Boston Globe* cited an American student contending “I kind of got the feel of being set up to hate the Russians” (1986: A30). The *Los Angeles Times* quoted an 11-year-old Soviet envoy named Katerina Lycheva lamenting “[i]t hurt me to see that the Soviet Union and the Soviet people could be shown in that way” (Anon. 1986a: 21). And the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that local high school students visiting Moscow had been compelled to apologize to their hosts after learning they had taken offence to *Rocky IV*’s “anti-Russian messages” (Johnson 1986: H3).

The American press also decried the apparent jingoism of *Rocky IV*. Overwriting the film’s thematization of Rocky’s personal motivations and its critique of hyper-patriotism, claims of this sort were rendered credible by somewhat misleading promotion that cloaked Balboa in the stars-and-stripes – figuratively and literally. Where print advertising featured a victorious Rocky wrapped in the American flag, audiovisual marketing concluded with two boxing gloves – one emblazoned with the Hammer & Sickle, the other Old Glory – exploding upon impact. Journalists framed this material, in the words of the *Chicago Sun-Times*’ Richard Freedman, as “distinctly not in keeping with the spirit of friendship between the countries proclaimed in Geneva” (1986: 37). They scorned *Rocky IV* as “overly patriotic”, “unnecessarily jingoistic”, “juiced up with nationalism”, and “a pitiful excuse

for unabashed flag-waving” (Lewis 1986: 25; Anon. 1986b: 12A; Anderson 1986: 11; Russell 1985: 8A).

Such condemnation, married to charges of Anti-Sovietism, led to a bottom-line criticism wherein the American press vilified *Rocky IV* as a bellicose tract that threatened détente by baiting audiences into a wanton blood-lust. Again, these claims did not reflect the film’s critique of media warmongery or a message of reconciliation it conveyed through Balboa’s calls for understanding among Soviets and Americans. Rather, journalists denounced *Rocky IV* for “whipping up a frenzy of hatred against the U.S.S.R” (Anon 1986b: 12A). Some of them submitted evidence – of a sort – of its incendiary capacities by way of statements about the audiences with whom they claimed to have seen the film; claims that went beyond the boisterousness described above. Where Julia Salmon of the *Wall Street Journal* described a man screaming “[s]platter him! Beautiful! I love it! C’mon Rocky!”, Jay Boyer of the *Orlando Sentinel* claimed patrons were “spoiling for a fight” (1985: 1; 1985: E1). One writer even raised concerns about the film’s potential to provoke nuclear conflict, warning “if the attitudes expressed in the fourth installment of the *Rocky* saga are an indication of genuine public opinion, it might be a good idea to check the location of the nearest fallout shelter” (Desmond 1985b: I2). Crucially, American newspapers provided a platform upon which others could voice these concerns, especially Soviet participants in the cultural exchanges agreed at Geneva. In a widely reported campaign decrying Cold War Cinema, the Kremlin’s Deputy Minister of Culture Georgi A. Ivanov worried *Rocky IV* posited “you can only deal with a Russian with a gun”, and the Soviet journalist Yevgeny Makorov proposed screenings should carry notices warning “ignorance plus ill will and hatred are dangerous things” (Boyer 1986: C22; 1986: C2). Perhaps the most damning indictment of all, however, came from the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who coined a label that several American journalists would swiftly adopt (see e.g. Anon. 1986c: 18). Fusing notions of exploitation, xenophobia, jingoism, and bellicosity, Yevtushenko simply dubbed the trend and its most talismanic manifestation “warnography” (cited in Marian 1987: A15).

Conclusion

The case of *Rocky IV* confirms an ongoing need to enrich understandings of historical media output by considering the para-texts that contribute so much to its public identity. This issue is especially pertinent to 1980s-Hollywood, I submit, because understandings of the decade derive largely from histories produced before consideration of these texts was more fully integrated into research methodologies. One such case is represented by its Cold War-themed output, which has been largely constructed through diachronic thematic analyses that cast it as a cathartic national(istic) cinema. However, a survey of the American popular press reveals that these films – especially *Rocky IV*

– actually provoked wholesale critical revulsion. Journalists and their sources denounced this film in particular, for threatening to stoke a wave of indignation that jeopardized the reconciliations of Geneva. To showcase their support for the cultural exchanges intended to foster such steps, they disregarded the film’s critique of media warmongering in order to frame it as jingoistic, xenophobic, bellicose exploitation.

The popular critical reception of *Rocky IV* represents a crucial albeit hitherto unacknowledged chapter in Cold-War-themed entertainment’s passage through American popular culture. Given the influence contemporaneous controversies exerted on the formats noted above, recognition of this development opens up opportunities to enrich our understandings of the trend. In particular, scholars may wish to consider how the backlash against *Rocky IV* impacted the production, content, marketing, and delivery of subsequent Cold War media, from films to television and beyond. They may also wish to expand explorations of Cold War Cinema’s reception into other spheres of American audiovisual culture such as cinephilia, as well as those of other countries. In so doing, we may develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Hollywood’s most industrially and culturally significant political output of the late-Cold-War period.

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