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IMAGES OF RUSSIANS IN AMERICAN CINEMA:
KATHRYN BIGELOW'S "K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER"

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Sergey Loginov

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ABSTRACT

IMAGES OF RUSSIANS IN AMERICAN CINEMA: KATHRYN BIGELOW'S "K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER"

by Sergey Loginov

This thesis examines the representation of Russians in the 2002 American motion picture "K-19: The Widowmaker." It discusses the film's content in the larger context of the history of portrayals of Russians in American cinema and compares it with two films, "The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming" and "The Hunt for Red October." In addition, the study analyzes American popular-press reviews of "K-19: The Widowmaker"; it examines the types of arguments the film critics used in assessing the appropriateness of the depiction of the Russian characters.

The findings indicate that "K-19: the Widowmaker" presents a novelty in both approach to the creation of images of Russians and the actual results of this approach as presented in the final cut of the film. The study also shows that the film critics took notice of this change in quality and content of representation and exhibited new attitudes in their writing.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Film as a medium of mass communication has been acknowledged as one of the sources contributing to the way one culture is perceived by another (e.g., Monaco, 2000; Goering, 2004; Heuer et al., 2001). Americans, for example, construct their images of Russians and Russia to a large extent through the images they see on television and in film.

Film criticism in its turn has been acknowledged as a communicative instrument serving to shape audiences' perceptions of films and acting as a primer contributing to the way audiences approach their evaluations of films (Hall, 2001). A recent study on film attendance indicated critics' reviews as one of the factors influencing a movie's market performance (Desai and Basuroi, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to assess the novelty in representation of Russians in the 2002 film "K-19: The Widowmaker," a major Hollywood picture focused on the events that took place at K-19, the first Russian nuclear ballistic missile submarine, events that theoretically could have led to the beginning of the third world war. Novelty here is understood as qualitative changes in both approach to the creation of images of Russians and the actual results of this approach as presented in the final cut of the film, for example, changes in whether positively portrayed characters are given more or less prominence than negative ones. The study also aims to assess the role of film critics in discourse surrounding the release of this picture. Therefore, the film's relationship to

real-world events, the intentions of the film's creators, the film's cast and the use of accents will be discussed as factors that contributed to the critics' evaluations of the film.

While the issue of representations in film in general and representations of specific cultural groups in particular have been addressed in the literature cited below, only two studies focused on representations of Russians. None of them analyzed the importance of film reviews in public discourse surrounding any controversial films depicting Russian people. Also, no comprehensive study was conducted on any particular American film produced in the 21st century that contained representations of Russia and Russians.

As the literature testifies, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hollywood films tended to offer one-dimensional depictions of their Russian characters. Whether friendly or hostile, they lacked the depth and complexity necessary to relate to them. Women were primarily portrayed as lost souls in need of help from irresistible western male characters (e.g. "Ninotchka," 1939; "The Spy Who Loved Me," 1977; "Triple X," 2002), men as militant adversaries motivated by a single destructive idea ("Rambo 2," 1985; "Rocky 4," 1984; "Triple X," 2002). Even relatively flattering films like "Doctor Zhivago" (1965) usually offered simplistic, superficial looks at Russians.

Kathryn Bigelow's "K-19: the Widowmaker" appears to stand out among other Russian films. The film is based on a true event. In 1961, amidst the Cold War arms race, the atomic submarine K-19 was on patrol in the North Atlantic and suffered a malfunction in its reactor which could have led to the explosion of the submarine and a U.S. battleship that was patrolling the waters nearby. To prevent the accident that could

have led to war between the United States and the Soviet Union, several submariners had to go inside the reactor and subject themselves to lethal doses of radiation. Only due to their unprecedented courage and self-sacrifice was the accident prevented. For more than 30 years, this information was withheld from the public.

Produced in part by National Geographic, this picture is based on solid research. The film script was revised by the veterans of K-19, and certain changes were made during the shooting process when the veterans had major objections to what they viewed as inaccuracies and exaggerations in the script. At a certain moment, the contradictions between the script and the veterans' perception of their representation were so acute, that the veterans wrote an open letter to the filmmakers demanding they stop production and withdraw their names from the titles. Bigelow and Co. were considerate of their objections. As a result, we have probably one of the most respectful pictures portraying Russian people in popular American cinema.

The goal of this research is to determine whether this change in quality and content of representation holds up under closer examination, and whether the film critics took notice and exhibited new attitudes in their writing. Two films from two different eras along with these films' reviews will be included in the study to create the frame of reference – “The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming” (1966) and “The Hunt for Red October” (1990). The reasoning behind the selection of these two is a unique situation for research — we have three films from three different time periods in U.S.-Russian relations that at different angles focus on one issue: the possibility of a threat to the United States coming from a Soviet submarine.

The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

RQ1: How are Russians represented in “K-19: The Widowmaker”? How different is this representation from other Hollywood films featuring Russian characters, such as “The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming” and “The Hunt for Red October”?

RQ2: Do press reviews of “K-19: The Widowmaker” reflect any differences found in RQ1? How might these reviews contribute to the understanding and evaluation of the film?

The research will generally follow the approach offered by Hall (2001) in her seminal analysis of movie reviews of Edward Zwick’s 1998 thriller, “The Siege.” The method for this study will be a qualitative analysis of press reviews accessed through Movie Review Query Engine, Rotten Tomatoes database, and InfoTrac Newspapers database.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

This literature review aims to synthesize, compare, and contrast some of the views on film criticism presented in the relevant literature and theories proposed to explain various aspects of national representations in film. It concludes with a brief look at some of the problems related to film criticism and its role in providing adequate background for the interpretation of national representations in motion pictures.

National Representations in Film

Being widespread and popular, socio-politically film “reflects and is integrated with human experience in general”; by providing powerful and convincing representations of reality, film “has a profound effect on members of its audience, psychopolitically” (Monaco, 2000, p. 261). Its contribution to the stereotyping of different cultures and nations has been widely recognized (Xing, 2003).

Films provide and help organize information about race, ethnicity, culture and otherness; they influence values and attitudes, help shape expectations and provide models for action (Cortes, 1992). Edensor (2002) stressed that films “provide often stereotypical representations of otherness which feed into forms of national belonging by providing images which can be reworked in (re)constructing ‘our’ identity as *not like* this otherness” (p. 142).

Researchers emphasized that media messages are the primary source of information one culture receives about another in the absence of direct interactions (Cortes, 1992; Gross, 1994; Goering, 2002; Benshoff, 2003). Hart (2002) noted that

trends in the representations could considerably influence the way audience members “perceive and respond to members of the groups represented in the media images they receive when they actually encounter such individuals in the real world” (p. 79).

A number of researchers have studied different aspects of representation of various social and cultural groups. For example, Hart (2002) examined representations of men with HIV/AIDS in 46 American movies produced in the 1980s and 1990s and found out that the majority of the films didn’t go beyond most standard narratives in that area, failing to produce a complete and accurate picture of AIDS. Shaheen’s (2000) study of the images of Muslim Arabs presented in more than 800 feature films, television newscasts, documentaries and entertainment shows in the United States showed that “lurid and insidious depictions of Arabs as alien, violent strangers, intent upon battling non-believers throughout the world, are staple” (p. 22).

Kilpatrick (1999) studied development of stereotypes in representations of Native Americans in film from the silent pictures era to the late 1990s. In her opinion, film is both the instrument and the object of representation. She argued that understanding of Hollywood representations of a particular ethnic or cultural group required viewing films as art, as “a socially situated utterance, a reflection of the film’s time of birth and the social and political milieu into which it was born” (p. xvi).

Similarly, Bogle (1994) addressed the issue of Hollywood representations of African Americans as further reproduction of existing stereotypes in American life and arts.

Benshoff and Griffin (2003), in their research on representations of different groups of American people in mainstream Hollywood film, noted its overall tendency to place straight white men as main characters and everyone else as tangential or non-existent. In his article on Mexican-American representations, Cortes (1992) similarly noted that Hollywood tended to differentiate Latinos on the basis of “coloredness” and “whiteness” with Zorro-type “Spanish” Latinos functioning as white.

Benshoff and Griffin (2003) also noted that Hollywood’s inclination to simplicity and obviousness resulted in abundantly linear storylines as well as in repetitive use of popular, already understood storylines and characters, including images of ethnic groups.

...racial and ethnic markers are activated within genres in unique and interesting ways. For example, Italian Americans (and more recently African Americans) have been closely tied to gangster film, while the representation of Native Americans is almost exclusively tied to the Western. (p. 29)

Representations of Russians in American Films

Researchers noticed that stereotypes about Russian people had existed in the United States since the times of the Cold War and hadn’t been counteracted in the mass media because “the Russian culture and people continue to be cast in images which only perpetrate negative stereotypes” (Heuer et al., 2001, p. 26).

Two studies have been made on the representations of Russians in American cinema, covering the periods from 1933 to 1991 and from 1990 to 2002, respectively. The first study was undertaken by Strada and Troper (1997) in their seminal work, *Friend or foe? Russians in American film and foreign policy, 1933-1991*. This work focused on

the U.S. films produced during the six decades of Soviet-American relations. Therefore, the time frame set by the authors was based on two important dates: 1933, when the Soviet Union was officially recognized by the States, and 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Strada and Troper (1997) defined seven subperiods of the U.S.-Soviet relationship that outline its cinematic reflection: 1933-1940 ambivalence, 1941-1945 accommodative war alliance, 1946-1962 acute Cold War, 1963-1971 liberal backlash and transition, 1972-1980 fragile *détente*, 1981-1985 Cold War reprise and 1986-1991 qualitative transformation.

Each of these time segments represented different nuances in the depiction of Russians. “When relations were tense, Hollywood fed off those tensions by creating villainous Russians [...] If relations warmed up, filmic Russians – mostly female – hit the other extreme by nuzzling up to perfection” (p.viii). At the same time, throughout the whole history of Russian presence in American film, regardless of any particular era and the state of diplomatic affairs between the two countries, there were always exceptions to the rules. For example, in the early 1980s, one of the most stereotype pounding era with its outrageous “Rambo 2” and “Rocky 4”, there were films that depicted Russia and Russians if not positively, at least with a considerable degree of sympathy and willingness to understand: Warren Beatty’s “Reds” (1982), Michael Apted’s “Gorky Park” (1984), Paul Mazursky’s “Moscow on the Hudson” (1985). As Strada and Troper observed:

the American psyche ... refused to make up its mind about the Soviet Union or the Russians in any way not readily reversible. Some Russians, the salt of the earth, were allowed to have heart even as their political system appeared heartless. (pp. 11-12)

The filmography presented in *Friend or foe?* contained 149 films that “depict Russians as protagonists or express views about the U.S.S.R. and its citizens” (p. xii). However, according to Dunn (1998) even this impressive list turned out to be incomplete. For each era Dunn mentioned a number of pictures that eluded Strada and Troper’s attention due to their too ambitious goal to identify every US feature film ever made about Russians. Dunn stated that Strada and Troper “have made their audience aware of many more films than they will ever have had the time or inclination to watch themselves” (1998, p. 464).

Strada and Troper (1997) emphasized that generally following the line of U.S. foreign policy, Hollywood had less enthusiasm for positive portraits of Russians than for negative ones. Even favorable films produced during the two détente-oriented periods of 1972-80 and 1986-91 “are not nearly as positive as opinions expressed in the daily editorials of major newspapers” (p. 200).

Strada and Troper (1997) came to the conclusion that Hollywood films depicting Russians “tend to offer exaggerated, dehumanized depictions of their Russian characters. Russians — whether friend or foe — tend to be flat and one-dimensional, lacking the depth and genuineness necessary to empathize with them” (p. 201).

Goering (2004), covering the period from 1990 to 2002, tried to locate only films that “a considerable number of people would have seen” (p. 2). Therefore, she focused only on theatrical releases with over \$40 million in gross box office receipts in the United States. Having used the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Goering came up with a total of 26 films that met all of her sampling criteria. Surprisingly, Goering claimed that she “was unable to find any study of the portrayal of Russians in American cinema, particularly of how that image may have changed as political relationships between the two countries have changed” (2004, p. 2). That excuse can be considered a flaw on the part of her research, because by the time Goering presented her research at the second meeting of the Russian Communication Association in 2004 in Rostov-na-Donu, Strada and Troper’s book had been published (1997) and made widely available.

Trying to answer the two questions of her research, “How are Russians represented in popular American films?” and “In what ways do representations of Russians in the post-Cold War era differ from representations during the Cold War?,” Goering found that the range of representations of Russians in American films was considerably broader in the post-Cold War era than it was during the Cold War, when Russians were primarily presented as members of the military, the KGB, or other governmental agencies. She went on to say that while such depictions were not absent from the films produced since 1990, there were also films that showed Russians in a wide variety of occupations making them visible in every walk of life.

Goering (2004) discovered a new tendency making Russians less visible as a cultural group. “They often are no longer cast as “Russians”; rather, they are neighbors,

shop owners, service workers, acquaintances, friends, etc., who just happen to be Russian” (p. 3). Another result that Goering came up with in her research was a reconfiguration of the Cold War era archetypes of “Russian-as-spy” and “Russian-as-fighter.” As a proof of this notion, Goering used the film “Independence Day” where the Russian fighter pilots were shown as working with rather than against Americans to defeat the common enemy. Still, in 14% of the movies included in her study, Russians are presented as “thugs,” “goons,” or Mafiosi.

A third trend observed by Goering was the emergence of new archetypes of Russian identity, such as the representation of the artist struggling to make it in the “free world.”

Goering (2004) concluded her study with an assumption that ...contemporary representations of Russians in American film may serve a different function than they did during the Cold War. In the 60s, 70s, and 80s, presenting Russians as “the enemy” played an important function in helping America define its own identity. Russians were presented as the “Them” against whom the “Us” could be defined. Post-Cold War movies seem to present Russians more pluralistically, with many identities, both positive and negative, and with these revised (re)presentations, Americans’ cultural perceptions of Russians are continuously being shaped and reshaped. (p. 3)

Approaches to Film Criticism

In his fundamental study, “How to read a film,” Monaco (2000) viewed film criticism as an activity that together with film theory has a common end of “an increased

understanding of the phenomenon of film” (p. 389). He noted that criticism practiced by reviewers has two relatively simple tasks – description and evaluation of a film, while theorists are generally preoccupied with “an intellectual activity that exists primarily for its own sake, and often has its own regards, but it doesn’t necessarily have much relation to the real world” (Ibid).

Prince (2004) viewed film criticism as “the attempt to discover and interpret the meanings and intentions of the film or filmmaker that extend beyond a film’s surface features” (pp. 377-378). Similarly to Monaco he pointed out the difference between scholarly and non-scholarly criticism, but subdivided the latter into two groups — newspaper and television reviewing, and general-interest journal-based criticism.

Prince considered newspaper and television reviewers as consumer guides whose primary goal is to help moviegoers decide whether they should see the film or not. He emphasized that reviewers typically give highly personalized and emotional responses to the film and usually provide a plot summary, a discussion of star performance and a brief statement of the film’s theme.

Prince viewed general-interest journal-based criticism as less directly consumer oriented, with greater emphasis on presenting a more detailed analysis of a film and mapping its place in a particular historical and cultural context.

For Prince, this type of criticism was presented in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *The Village Voice*, and *The New York Review of Books*. He noted that the readers of these magazines are generally well acquainted with other films

and with film criticism, and therefore are often interested in in-depth discussion and analysis of films.

Similarly to Monaco and Prince, Hall (2001) viewed the purpose of film reviewing to be in guiding the audience on whether they should see a film or not, but added that reviews also provided frames and background information shaping “how at least some viewers interpret and respond to the films they choose to see” (p. 400). She also argued that Prince’s distinction between the two categories of newspaper and television reviewing and general-interest journal-based criticism was not always clear, nor was it always clearly based on medium. Analyzing reviews of the 1998 film “The Siege,” she found that there were “substantive differences across newspaper reviews” and that articles published in prestige papers in big cities generally paid more attention to the “potential social impact of the film and its representation patterns than those in lesser-known papers published in smaller, and perhaps less diverse, cities” (p. 403).

She further examined the constraints limiting the number of perspectives through which critics could evaluate film: space or time limits, the imperative of timeliness, and the genre expectations of the audience, its diversity of political and social beliefs (Hall, 2001, pp. 404-405). She also emphasized that unless urged by circumstances surrounding a particular topic, reviewers often don’t cover certain aspects of the film’s implications and meaning, such as “how the representation in a particular film may serve to reify or to challenge existing social patterns such as racism, patriarchy or ethnocentrism” (Ibid).

Hall held that most reviewers tended to rely on the auteur concept, according to which the author, that is the director, is the guiding force behind a film sending his or her audience a message or creating an effect.

In her research she addressed the role of film critic in terms of Gramsci's conception of the intellectual as "as a role with the primary function of organizing, administering, or managing information for others" (Hall, 2001, p. 402). Film reviewers have the ability to influence the way audiences manage the messages implied in particular films, thus contributing to the media's role in maintaining existing beliefs or encouraging social change.

A similar approach was used by Allen & Lincoln (2004), who referred to film critics as reputational entrepreneurs who produced and disseminated the discourse shaping the reputation of films and their authors.

A similar approach had been offered earlier by Travis (1990), who looked at film criticism in light of theories of social fashion. He used the concept of routinization as "a way of rationalizing revelations and judgments that arise outside of everyday routine" (p. 53). In his opinion critics set social fashion in film by routinizing what was unclear and overlooked in films and protecting the public against false claims to its attention.

According to him:

...film critics tend to rely on status to (1) give their criticism a sense of legitimacy; (2) protect themselves against negative reactions to their criticism; and (3) carry off any of their unelaborated criticism through the prestige of their social position. (p. 58)

He also noted the tendency of mainstream critics to evaluate current film production in terms of an established set of values, thus imparting a sense of legitimacy to their profession and a sense of permanence to film fashion.

The majority of critics and researchers who addressed the question of the nature of film criticism unanimously agreed that the profession itself implied subjectivity, evaluation of which ranged from “buffed-up personal opinion” (Saltzman, 2002) to journalistic duty (Bone & Johnson, 1997).

Mass Communication Studies of Film Reviews

Messaris (1993) analyzed press reviews of Spike Lee’s 1989 controversial film “Do the Right Thing.” The criteria he used to select reviews seem somewhat arbitrary. He chose 15 reviews from a number of sources providing no sufficient motivation for the selection of those sources. He included two national news magazines, two celebrity oriented magazines, two New York-focused magazines, two national circulation newspapers, two magazines and four newspapers focused on African-American issues. The research showed that the majority of the selected publications, with the exception of only four, tended to neglect Lee’s approach in presenting a nuanced, complex representation of black and white characters in his picture. For 11 reviewers this complexity and the open-ended conclusion of the picture served as proof of either Lee’s incompetence or moral or political failing.

Messaris viewed these responses as an illustration of media’s inclination toward a polarized treatment of controversial issues rooted in the assumption of the general public’s bigger responsiveness to simplistic black-and-white presentations than to more

nuanced depictions. He noted that “ambiguity and elusiveness that might have been welcomed in an art film may be deemed irresponsible by critics when a film has a mass audience” (p. 227).

A more comprehensive approach to analysis of film reviews was offered by Hall (2001) in her qualitative study of popular critics’ evaluations of Edward Zwick’s action film, “The Siege,” a motion picture that contained representations of Arabs. The goal of the research was to “detect a portion of the range of arguments that were offered to viewers in evaluations of the films, rather than to create a typology or to track the relative weights of varying perspectives within the discourse” (p. 411).

Unlike Messaris, Hall was more consistent in the way she chose the material for her research. She selected a larger sample of approximately 40 reviews of the film that were targeted to general readerships and published within a month of the film’s release in a wide range of sources and that could be retrieved from Lexis/Nexis and the Academic Index databases and also accessed through the Internet Movie Database's entry on the film.

As the survey showed, all the critics based their evaluations of appropriateness of the film’s representation of social groups against its relationship to real-world events, the declared intentions of the film's creators, and constraints of the action film genre.

Her research contained some meaningful observations on the impact of film reviews upon moviegoers. Reviews can help maintain existing perceptions and contribute to selective exposure of a film by informing readers on its prejudicial representations. As in politics, entertainment media can prime the audience’s perception

of various issues – film reviewers can set up the audiences' interpretation of films by paying close attention to certain things and disregarding others. Most moviegoers are unlikely to read more than one or two reviews before watching a film, and therefore are unable to have a broad prospective on a particular controversial issue. Often they pick a reviewer whose taste and preferences are similar to their own.

If film audiences adopt the criteria used by the reviewers in their own evaluations of a film, it can shape how they ultimately evaluate the film. Over time, the use of these criteria may influence the degree to which they consider media representation to be a problem and affect what initiatives, if any, they favor to address the issue (Hall, 2001, p. 421).

Overview

Previous researchers have explored Hollywood's representations of African, Mexican, and Native Americans (Bogle, 1994; Cortes, 1992; Kilpatrick, 1999), Muslim Arabs (Shaheen, 2002) and men with HIV/AIDS (Hart, 2002). Two studies examined the history of cinematic representations of Russians (Strada & Troper, 1997; Goering, 2002). The approaches discussed above addressed the matters of American film criticism in a number of ways. For example, Prince (2004) suggested classification of film criticism based on a type of publication – scholarly, newspaper and television reviewing and general-interest journal-based criticism. On the other hand, Travis (1990) applied the concept of routinization, characterizing the film critic as a cultural authority establishing social fashion. Similarly, Hall (2001) and Allen & Lincoln (2004) referred to the theories that implied the role of film critic as the intellectual who organized and managed

information for others and reputational entrepreneur respectively. Film reviews matter both as consumer guides and cultural commentaries, shaping moviegoers' approach to understanding of film content and evaluation of various aspects of representations.

Two mass communication studies specifically analyzed film reviews in terms of their ability to address problematical implications of two particular motion pictures "Do the Right Thing" and "The Siege" (Messaris, 1993; Hall, 2001).

The two studies that dealt with reviews were related to film representations of other cultural groups and based on somewhat questionable selection criteria. In one of the cases the amount of examined reviews was not comprehensive enough: Messaris (1993) studied only 15 reviews of "Do the Right Thing," without providing substantial motivation why the study was limited to these particular reviews. Movie Review Query Engine search produced 45 results for this film. Hall (2001) was more consistent in her selection criteria and analyzed 46 reviews of "The Siege" she found through Lexis/Nexis, Academic Index and IMDB. Still, Movie Review Query Engine search produced 138 results for this film.

CHAPTER THREE

Method

DVD versions of the three films for this study will be analyzed by this researcher. The portrayal of Russians in each of the films will be described and analyzed in their connection to a respective era of U.S.-Russian relations using the scheme established by Strada and Troper (1997). The content of “The Russians are Coming,” “The Hunt for Red October” and “K-19: the Widowmaker” will be compared to each other in order to test the initial hypotheses on the latter’s novelty in its complex and respectful representation of Russians.

Reviews of “K-19: the Widowmaker” available in a wide range of sources will then be examined in order to allow for the analysis of a variety of different reviewer arguments. Three databases will be used to locate reviews for analysis: MRQE (Movie Review Query Engine), Rotten Tomatoes, and InfoTrac Newspapers. The combined search from all three databases will be narrowed down to reviews published in the U.S. newspapers only. MRQE is a searchable, Internet search engine that allows the researcher to search more than 48,000 movies by title in English or original language, with links to more than 470,000 reviews in English, German, Italian, French, Castilian, Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, Portuguese, and Icelandic. The initial search for “K-19: The Widowmaker” located 194 articles. Three criteria were used to restrict the sample size: First, the search was limited to reviews written in English. Second, only reviews published in the U.S. media were selected. Third, magazines and publications that have only online versions and personal Web sites were excluded. The reasoning behind the

last two decision criteria is that I wanted to locate reviews targeted to the general public (as opposed to film fans only) that a considerable number of people in the U.S. would have read. Rotten Tomatoes is a movie rating site and searchable database containing more than 127,000 titles and 644,000 review links and providing a variety of information on films shown in the United States. Similarly to MRQE, it allows researcher to look for reviews of particular movies, but only in English. Some of the reviews are stored on the Rotten Tomatoes Web site, the rest are linked to the sites of respective publications. I limited my search to newspapers only, excluding results from countries other than the United States and inactive links. Additionally, InfoTrac Newspapers database was used to access reviews from a number of publications that at the moment of my search had already withdrawn their online versions of reviews from open access. Finally, Editor and Publisher International Yearbook (Editor and Publisher, 2003) was used to limit that sample only to newspapers that at the moment of the film release were in the top one hundred list in terms of circulation. A total of 52 reviews met all of the sampling criteria and were, therefore, included in the study.

Several reviews of “The Russians are Coming” and “The Hunt for Red October” were added to the research in order to find to what extent they might be comparable in their critiques to those of “K-19.”

As noted by Hall (2001), ascertaining the criteria that reviewers use to evaluate a film may “contribute to understandings of the ways in which audiences interpret and respond to debates about media texts' representations of social groups.”

To conduct the qualitative analysis, the reviews will be read in their entirety, noting the overall evaluation of the film. Parts of the review that either mentioned objections to the film or which otherwise described the appropriateness of the film's representation of Russians will be marked and subjected to closer examination. Once preliminary results are formulated, the relative proportions of the confirming examples will be compared to the rest of the reviews in order to determine which patterns presented themselves consistently and were not opposed by the other examples. The findings presented will be organized either by the types of arguments that the reviewers used to arrive at their conclusions or by the direction of evaluation of the film's representation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The criticism of “The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming” (1966) and “The Hunt for Red October” (1990) in the context of their time

In order to provide the historical and cultural frame of reference for the main purpose of this study, the analysis of “K-19: the Widowmaker” and its reviews in the mainstream U.S. media, two films — “The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming” and “The Hunt for Red October” — and a sample of their reviews will be discussed. Both films can be viewed as predecessors of “K-19.” Like the latter, they feature a Soviet submarine supposedly presenting a threat to the United States.

“The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming.” The film appeared on the screen in 1966, in the period of liberal backlash and transition in the U.S.-Soviet relationships (Strada & Troper, 1997), four years after the Cuban missile crisis. In this comedy making fun of the Cold War stereotypes, a Soviet submarine named Sprut (Octopus) runs aground near Gloucester Island, off the coast of New England. Appearance of a group of sailors sent ashore to find a powerboat to dislodge the submarine creates a panic among the islanders who decide that a Russian invasion has begun. In the climactic standoff scene of the film, dozens of locals point their guns at the Soviet submarine. The exchange of fire seems almost inevitable when a boy slips from his perch on the top of the church steeple. His trousers get caught on a nail and he dangles high above the ground, risking falling down at any moment. The situation produces a sobering effect on the opponents as they all drop their weapons and rush

together to save the child. This spontaneous bonding nullifies their preliminary conflict based on mutual misunderstanding. The townsfolk help the submariners to go safely to deep water by escorting them in an improvised convoy of small craft, while U.S. military airplanes circle overhead.

There is also a mini romance between a local woman, Alison Palmer, and a Russian sailor, Alexei Kolchin. Noting the film's overall emphasis on finding similarities rather than differences between Russians and Americans, Shatnoff (1966) paid attention to the cast of the film. Alison Palmer was played by Andrea Dromm, a model who became nationally known as a stewardess in a National Airlines commercial and as the Clairol "Summer Blonde" in TV and print ads in the mid-60s. In Shatnoff's opinion, it was a fine casting choice, because Dromm is "the image of what many think the image of an American girl must be, a kind of a cartoon of an idea for a cartoon" (p. 32). The fact that she gives a kiss to a Russian sailor and the kiss itself indicates how far American cinema has moved "towards a warmer Comrade" (Ibid.).

Strada and Troper (1997) viewed "The Russians Are Coming" as one of the bellwether films, i.e. important films typifying the liberal backlash and transition period in the Soviet-American relation. They shared a view of the film similar to that of Shatnoff acknowledging its humane message. They connected it to the experience of the Cuban missile crisis that both the United States and the Soviet Union had to pass through.

In the celluloid standoff at Gloucester Island's tiny port — like the real nuclear standoff in the Caribbean — both Americans and Russians become hostage to their weapons. For deadly confrontation to be avoided, America needs to

recognize that its most serious enemy is not the Soviet Union, but the nuclear brinkmanship threatening human extinction. (p. 97)

Shatnoff (1966) and Strada and Troper (1997) expressed a similar notion that although the comedy didn't vilify Russians and had an overall humorous and friendly depiction of them presenting them as likable characters, it didn't indicate a reduction in the political tension between the two countries. Rather, it is the priority in the concept of the enemy that has been reconsidered.

The Soviet system, still an enemy, had given way to a greater enemy — total war. If the Soviet Union epitomized a social order rejected by America, nuclear overkill threatened an end to any social order, and possibly to mankind. [...] China more and more crystallized in the popular mind as the most irresponsible source of communist “adventurism.” The Soviets, by comparison, appeared relatively conservative. As America felt its way through the 1960s, the anti-Soviet legacy of the 1950s faded to the margins like some past indiscretion better forgotten (Strada & Troper, 1997, pp. 97-98).

It's almost as if we don't know what to do with the old equation between Russians and Communists (except, perhaps, drop it?) now that we are all anxiously looking farther left at Communism Mao Tse-tung style. In comparison, Russians seem more benign (Shatnoff, 1966, p. 31).

According to Norman Jewison, the director of “The Russians Are Coming,” the film was very well received in the official circles of both the Soviet Union and the United States, where it became one of the few films to have been included in the Congressional

Record “as an important political statement about the futility of international warfare” (Carson, 2002). Jewison also became one of the first Hollywood filmmakers who received an official invitation to Moscow at the time when no American was allowed to go behind the Iron Curtain (Ibid.)

The film’s positive message that Russians and Americans can ultimately understand each other was received by the film reviewers in the mainstream press (e.g., Schiekel, 1966; Mastroianni, 1966; Chapin, 1966).

Alden (1966) of *The New York Times*, the newspaper that had the third largest circulation in the country, emphasized that by personalizing a dangerous confrontation between Russians and Americans, the picture revealed “the good and bad in both,” and “the fundamental fact that, after all, Russians and Americans are basically human beings and, therefore share basic human qualities”.

Like the scholarly critic Shatnoff (1966), popular critics understood that “The Russians Are Coming” didn’t indicate a significant improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations and even “played crudely on the hopes of an audience anxious to see the real cold war turn out to be a joke” (“Bumble Bee,” 1966).

“The Hunt for Red October.” This picture appeared on American screens in 1990, at the height of the glasnost-perestroika period in the Soviet Union and one year prior to its collapse. In the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was the period characterized by Strada and Troper (1997) as qualitative transformation, when “an incredibly rapid and profound set of changes transformed the two world

superpowers, first from enemies to adversaries, then almost unbelievably, from adversaries to cautious allies” (p. 173).

Directed by John McTiernan and with Sean Connery in the main role, “The Hunt for Red October” is based on the novel of the same name written six year earlier by Tom Clancy. Due to the political changes that happened in the world since the book was published, the filmmakers had to make certain changes in the script as well.

In fact, as a condition for his acceptance of the role of Ramius, Sean Connery insisted that “it was important to establish that the story takes place pre-Gorbachev” (Roeper, 1990).

Clancy’s book was partially based on real events. In 1975, Valeriy Sablin, captain of the Soviet frigate *Storozhevoi*, together with several accomplices, tried to defect on his ship to Sweden, but Soviet aerial bombing stopped him fifty miles from Swedish waters and he was forced to return to the frigate’s base in Riga, Latvia. Sablin was sentenced to death and his accomplices received various terms of imprisonment (Suid, 1996, p. 238).

Clancy wrote his book about a Soviet captain of Latvian descent, defecting on a submarine to the United States. His origin adds a new level of plausibility to the story, since Latvia, as well as Estonia and Lithuania, were always the most Western-oriented republics of the former Soviet Union. The vessel in question is *Red October*, a new strategic submarine that uses a propulsion system based on magneto-hydrodynamics, an energy technology that allows the boat to move silently. If the Soviet Union really had such a boat, it could present a serious threat to the United States. And the detailed

elaboration with which the technology was presented in the book made it hard to believe that the book was just a work of fiction and that its author didn't have any connections in the Pentagon or in the defense industry (Lipschutz, 2001).

In the film, Sean Connery's character, Captain Ramius, together with his senior officers, undertakes an attempt to defect to the States while commanding the Red October. The submarine is hunted by both the Soviet Navy, which claims that Ramius is going to attack the United States with nuclear missiles, and the American Navy, which believes that claim. CIA researcher-agent Jack Ryan (played by Alec Baldwin) thinks Ramius is trying to defect and turn over the sub to Americans. He manages to persuade the U.S. Navy of the true intentions of Ramius. In order to save the situation and avoid a nuclear incident, Agent Ryan must board Red October and assist Captain Ramius in its navigation to U.S. waters.

In Clancy's novel, Ramius uses his boat to destroy another Russian submarine, Konovalov, which has been in the pursuit of the Red October. This however doesn't happen in the film. John McTiernan noted that "it would be difficult for people to sympathize with the Russian captain if he killed 100 innocent countrymen like that... So we had the sinking of the Konovalov caused by the impetuosity of its captain" (Honan, 1990).

If in the book the main reason for Ramius's decision to defect is his anger over his wife's death during childbirth, in the movie the reason is that Ramius finds the Red October's offensive, first-strike weapon capabilities too dangerous for the world order. That's why he's not just a traitor, but turned by the script into "a selfless hero, a man who

transcends national borders and takes a chance that might leave the world better off than he found it” (Suid, 1996, p. 239).

Thus the filmmakers tried to adjust the work created during the Cold War to the tone of a new era in the U.S.-Russian relations. Ramius and his supporters aboard the Red October are supposed to personify the state of mind of the most progressive Russian citizens, the state of mind that led to the changes that happened in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev’s reign. Like Gorbachev himself, they take a leap of faith towards America, hoping that they will be accepted, understood and thanked for saving the world from a nuclear threat. They are trying to break free from their behind-the-Iron-Curtain past. In the movie the past is personified not only by the Soviet Navy that chases the Red October but also by a political officer and a KGB agent on board of the submarine, the traditional evil images that American audience could easily digest. Drastic measures need to be taken sometimes for the sake of the future; that’s why both the officer and the agent get killed.

In a way, the film presents how America perceived new Russia—dangerous, unstable, but increasingly desiring to be at peace with its former rival and even embraced by it. At the beginning of the film, when we see the Red October embarking from its base, Ramius says, “It’s time.” According to McTiernan it means:

It’s time for change, time to take a desperate chance for peace. Audiences understand that. They understand that the film is about “Can they get where they’re going in time? Can they meet somebody who will trust them? Will

somebody take a chance for peace?" It sounds sloppy, but those questions always enter into what's happening in the film (Roeper, 1990).

At the end of the film, after the defection has been successfully completed, the positive message is emphasized in the dialogue between Jack Ryan and Ramius. "There will be hell to pay in Moscow when the dust settles from all of this," says Ryan and Ramius replies: "Perhaps some good will come of it."

"The Hunt for Red October" also reflects some of the stereotypical perceptions of Russians that Americans likely had at that time. In one of the scenes, for example, the submarine crew members start singing the national anthem of the Soviet Union just out of sheer patriotism.

For some reason, Vasiliy Borodin, one of the defecting officers (played by Sam Neil), dreams of — of all places — living in Montana. It's hard to say what inspired Tom Clancy to that reference, but ironically, hardly known by anybody now Montana was a brand of jeans that was hugely popular in the Soviet Union in the early 1980s. Many people thought the brand was named after the state.

Borodin says, "I will live in Montana. And I will marry a round American woman and raise rabbits, and she will cook them for me. And I will have a pickup truck... maybe even a 'recreational vehicle.'"

To a certain extent the film revitalizes a seasoned Hollywood tradition noted by Shatnoff (1966) of presenting the rest of the world as "a great conglomerate of underprivileged "immigrants" who need — and want — the American Way of Life" (p. 33).

Partially because of its timeliness, the film was a huge box-office success. With \$30 million in production budget the movie made more than \$120 million domestically (Box-office performance, 2002). Critics primarily evaluated it as a mere spy adventure thriller, not as a picture with a serious political statement (e.g. Lovell, 1990; Lipper, 1990; Hicks, 1990). The film was made by the director most known for Bruce Willis blockbuster “Die Hard,” with the assistance of the U.S. Navy and peppered with special effects from Industrial Light and Magic. A *Washington Post* writer characterized it as “a Reagan youth's wet dream of underwater ballistics and East-West conflict” (Howe, 1990).

Those who paid attention to how the film portrayed its Russian characters were largely cautious in their evaluations. Ebert (1990), for instance, noted that Sean Connery’s Ramius is “far from being a typical movie Soviet,” but didn’t elaborate on the topic any further. Baltake (1990) viewed the film as “a feel-good post-Cold War saga” that “doesn't exactly go out of its way to honor the enemy, but it doesn't indulge in Russian-bashing either.” Similarly, for Canby (1990) the film was an “elegy for those dear, dark, terrible days of the cold war, when it was either them or us, and before the world had become so thoroughly fractured that it's no longer possible to know exactly who the them are.”

Other critics viewed the film’s attempt of presenting somewhat new, improved Russians as unsuccessful. A *Wall Street Journal* critic who gave “The Hunt for Red October” an overall positive evaluation noted that “The movie's one attempt to humanize its characters is a flop. When one of the Soviet defectors starts to tell how much he pines

for a ranch in Montana, head for the popcorn stand.” Jacobs (1990) evaluated the film characters as “hopelessly one-dimensional” and the film itself as “hopelessly out of date. It feels like a '60s movie — a watery “Fail Safe” — rather than a drama for the age of glasnost.”

Lovell (1990) adhered to a similar point of view:

For it [the film] to work, we not only have to suspend disbelief, we have to recast our new allies in global democracy as stereotypical Kremlin stooges intent on world domination. It is these throwback Russkies that are evoked by the movie's “Volga Boatmen” theme music. It's also these caricatured “commies” that are damned, out of hand, by the film's equally archaic chiefs of staff and politicians.

“K-19: the Widowmaker”

“K-19: the Widowmaker” was released in 2002 when the relations between the United States and Russia went as far as to allow American filmmakers to shoot in Russian governmental buildings and attend a military base (K-19 Handbook, 2002). A former Soviet submarine captain Sergei Aprelev was one of the film’s technical advisers. The film revives the events of the Cold War that for about 30 years were covered in secrecy; even its participants were not allowed to talk about it to anybody. During its first mission K-19, the first Soviet nuclear submarine able to carry ballistic missiles, suffered a malfunction in the cooling system of one of its two reactors. Risking their lives, several crew members went to the reactor compartment to jerry-rig the cooling system. Eight of them died within days after the return to the home port, 14 more within

two years. Western specialists had heard rumors but no details until 1991, when Pravda finally confirmed that radiation had killed many of the crew (Bivens, 1993).

The film became the first feature film produced by the National Geographic. A San José Mercury News critic noted that this fact may help to explain the film's "humorless, albeit eye-popping, verisimilitude" (Lovell, 2002).

According to the director of the film:

In compressing the timeline of events, focusing in on key relationships and a manageable number of crew members as central characters, we decided to change the names of actual people involved so as to not misrepresent, or inadvertently omit, the noble actions of the real heroes of K-19 (Bigelow, 2002b, p. 206).

The film starts with the following textual information:

In 1961, the Soviet Union has enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world two times over. The United States has enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world ten times over. Each nation continues to build more. In 1961 Americans forward deploy nuclear submarines within range of Leningrad and Moscow. Powerful men on both sides believe the war is inevitable. It is only a question of when. And who will strike first (Bigelow, 2002a).

In our opinion, by providing this information at the very beginning of the film, its authors predispose the audience to the opinion that is not only the Soviet Union, but the United States as well that was equally if not more responsible for the real threat of nuclear war. If "The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming," and earlier Stanley Kubrick's "Dr. Strangelove" delivered the same message using the means of

satire, “K-19: the Widowmaker” became the first mainstream American film dealing with the Cold War that worded it in a matter-of-fact way.

The film begins with a test trial in a dry dock during which it becomes obvious that the boat is not ready for operation yet. The boat’s captain, Mikhail Polenin (played by Liam Neeson) is removed from command of K-19 when the top Soviet military executives decide he isn’t readying their flagship sub fast enough for her maiden voyage. The reason for the rush, as presented by Marshall Zelentsov (played by Joss Ackland), is “a certain knowledge of destruction in return — what is to stop America from destroying Moscow and Leningrad. K-19 is that knowledge” (Bigelow, 2002a). Thus once again is emphasized the idea of the Soviets trying to respond to an American military attack, not initiating it, a point of view not presented in any other Russian-themed film before.

In place of Polenin, the naval leadership assigns Captain Alexei Vostrikov (played by Harrison Ford), a strictly “mission-oriented” officer with an iron will, who takes K-19 out to sea accurately on schedule on June 18, 1961.

“We deliver or we drown,” says Vostrikov.

Polenin, due to his practical knowledge of the sub, remains on board as Vostrikov’s executive officer, and the two conflict repeatedly. They are both, however, dedicated to the Navy and to the country they serve.

Once under way, Vostrikov tests K-19 and the crew to the utmost degree, conducting multiple drills, driving the submarine and the men to the edge by plunging toward maximum diving depth, then beyond, barely short of the fatal “crush depth,” nearly 1,000 feet under the sea.

Finally, the exhausting sea trials end with the successful launch of a test missile. Then a fateful order comes from Moscow: K-19 is to head westward, slipping past NATO bases to take up its patrol station about 250 miles off the U.S. coastline, between Washington, D.C., and New York.

Unaware that the submarine has been crippled, Captain Vostrikov obeys the order, taking K-19 and his men on what could be their last voyage. On July 4, 1961, with the patrol mission scarcely under way, the submarine's reactor cooling system springs a leak, and the reactor core starts heating up. If it reaches 1,000 degrees the reactor could melt, with catastrophic results.

To fix the leak several men voluntarily go into the reactor compartment in 10-minute shifts. Polenin's suggestion to ask for help from a nearby NATO base on Jan Mayen, Norway, is harshly rejected by Vostrikov. For Polenin their duty at that critical moment is to save lives; for Vostrikov, it is to defend the state to the last dying breath.

A mutiny is initiated by political officer Igor Suslov (played by Ravil Isyanov), during which Vostrikov is handcuffed and Polenin is offered to command the boat. The latter, however, refuses; he releases Vostrikov and puts the renegades under arrest.

The first attempt at repair provides only temporary solution. The reactor starts heating up again. After Vostrikov explains to the crew the catastrophe that can happen should an explosion occur, more people volunteer, including the neophyte reactor officer Vadim Radtchenko (played by Peter Sarsgaard), who initially has a panic attack but later manages to pull himself together.

The repair scenes produced a significant impression on many of the film reviewers. LaSalle (2002) of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, for instance, noted:

The men in “K-19: the Widowmaker” also undergo changes, and that's stirring as well. They go not only from self-interest to heroism but also from heroism to intelligent heroism. By the end, they're not heroes of a Soviet state that's unworthy of them, but of a world that only now is becoming privy to their sacrifice.

A reviewer from *The Des Moines Register* made an analogous comment:

The heroism and sacrifice that follow are extraordinary and moving, an achievement for a film told entirely from the Russian perspective. It's even more impressive that you'll care deeply about the fate of a group of men that 40 years ago were America's sworn enemies (Bruner, 2002).

Other critics expressed similar views. “The movie is filled with the mournful sense that you're watching a fleet of men, not trying to out-dude one another, but turning over their lives to the ideals of Communism” (Morris, 2002). “The patriotism that is displayed has to be admired, regardless of politics” (Vincent, 2002b).

As radiation begins to spread all over the sub, Vostrikov comes to a decision to countermand Moscow and ask help from Americans in an attempt to save the lives of his crew. He nevertheless is not going to give up the boat to the enemy and is going to sink it with himself onboard. Fortunately, K-19 is found by another Soviet submarine.

The next episode after the evacuation takes place in a military court where Vostrikov is brought to a trial and Polenin reports trying to protect his captain. In his

speech he emphasizes the courage displayed by the captain and the crew and the unjust treatment they all were subjected to on their return. We learn that seven crew members died and that the rest were interrogated even while undergoing treatment from radiation poisoning, locked up, and denied access to their families.

In its last scenes, the film jumps to 1989; a TV in Vostrikov's apartment shows a news report on the fall of the Berlin Wall. The on-screen text informs us that the captain of K-19 was acquitted but never commanded a submarine again. He and the surviving crew were sworn to secrecy and couldn't even mourn their lost comrades until the fall of the communism.

At the last scene the surviving members of K-19 meet at a cemetery. We find out that Vostrikov had nominated them for the Hero of the Soviet Union title but was rejected because it was just an accident, and because it didn't happen during wartime. Vostrikov says, "What good are honors from such people?"

Unlike almost no other Hollywood movie dealing with portrayals of Russians, "K-19: the Widowmaker" doesn't have a single American character. The last time it happened was in World War II propaganda movies like "The North Star" (Strada & Troper, 1997, p. 200). Since then, no filmmaker until Kathryn Bigelow had tried to deliver a message entirely from a Russian prospective. Before Bigelow, a typical portrayal of Russians — even in relatively pro-Russian movies like "The Russians are Coming, The Russians are Coming" and "The Hunt for Red October" — usually somehow contributed to the us-vs.-them paradigm, thus helping America "define its own identity" (Goering, 2004, p. 3). The goal of "K-19: the Widowmaker," as will be

discussed further, was to make the American audience identify with the Russian characters. Although the film does not idealize Russians and presents both positive and negative Russian characters, the significant prominence is given to the former. The main negative character in the film is the Soviet leadership that rushed K-19 to go on a mission knowing that the boat was not quite ready and refusing to acknowledge the heroism of the sub's crew after the accident. This message revitalizes the tendency noted by Strada and Troper (1997) as early as in the 1930s Russian-genre films, that is of "bad system-good people" (p. 196).

Other relatively negative characters in the film are two officers who rebelled against Vostrikov. Even so, the film provides enough motivation to the actions of these characters for the audience to sympathize with them: they are in a life-and-death situation and they disagree with their captain's decision.

A separate topic in Hollywood films featuring Russians is the use of alcohol. For instance, a 1998 Bruce Willis thriller "Armageddon" featured a drunken Russian astronaut. That image might be partly the responsibility of former Russian President Boris Yeltsin whose morbid affinity to alcohol was widely known. As will be discussed further, the veterans of K-19 criticized the first script for portraying them as "incompetent drunks," saying that the words "vodka" and "drink" appeared almost more often than the words "sea" and "submarine" ("Harrison Ford's Submarine," 2002). Having no opportunity to verify this information, we can only observe that in the finished film there are very few scenes featuring alcohol. All of them are short and seem rather appropriate. One of the scenes, for instance is the final one, taking place at a cemetery where veterans

have a single drink and drip some vodka on the grave of their deceased comrades as is a Russian commemorative tradition. A more controversial moment is when the first reactor officer Yashin is found drunk and asleep during the construction period. Vostrikov immediately fires him. Submariners have red wine, which is according to popular belief releases strontium from the human organism. Even the real captain of K-19 believed alcohol could somehow help slow the radiation infection. None of the scenes featuring alcohol neither contributes much to the images of Russians in the film, nor adds to them any negative connotation.

The Film in the Making. The idea to create a film about K-19 and its heroic crew came to Kathryn Bigelow in 1996, when she saw a British documentary about the submarine. She felt so interested in the story that she was ready to direct it as a play if she couldn't raise money to turn it into a film. The whole process of creating "K-19: the Widowmaker" demonstrates a new approach to portraying Russians in a major Hollywood production. Kathryn Bigelow had enough courage and determination to create a truly respectful portrayal of Russian submariners; she demonstrated it both in her research and the finished film. She managed to overcome initial prejudice and distrust displayed by the veterans who after protesting the production of the film thanked her for telling their story.

The excitement and the challenge for me as a filmmaker has always been to induce an American audience to become the "Other," to identify with the mindset of a group of people who for decades they had regarded as the "Enemy" (Bigelow, 2002b, p. 202).

In mainstream Hollywood, the Russians have not been treated as heroes. But I felt, if a member of the audience could begin to identify with these submariners and want them to survive, then you crossed the Rubicon, so to speak. That's what set me on my journey (Elrick, 2002).

Her dedication to tell the story of the Soviet submarine led to several years of research, during which she met with the widow of Captain Nickolay Zateyev and the surviving submariners. Actors Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson accompanied Bigelow on her meetings with the veterans. Together with cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth and first assistant director Steve Danton, Bigelow became one of the first Western civilians to have visited the actual K-19 at a naval base on the Kola Peninsula.

According to Bigelow, the veterans were initially very suspicious of her idea, keeping in mind the traditionally unfavorable representation of Russians in Hollywood films (Elrick, 2002). Still, her enthusiasm and promises to portray them with due respect persuaded them to share their stories (Bigelow, 2002b, p. 206). Interestingly enough, the initial script written by Christopher Kyle raised indignation among the veterans of K-19. They accused the filmmakers in the attempt of portraying them as “a bunch of incompetent drunks” and even threatened to sue them should the film based on that script come out. In their open letter they mentioned that the script “resurrects the worst pieces of mythmaking and artistic imagery of the Cold War era” (Mukhin et al., 2002). They were particularly irritated with the conflict between the characters of Ford and Neeson, saying that on a Russian submarine there could be no place for a squabble between its top officers (Ibid.).

One of the veterans said that “if we had the type of crew that was portrayed in the first script, the submarine would have sunk before it even had a chance to leave port” (Titova, 2002).

Even after the veterans’ concerns were somewhat addressed and drinking scenes were toned down, the veterans were still angry. Their spokesman stated that drinking onboard was pure lies and that “you wouldn’t let these men in your apartment let alone onto a nuclear submarine” (“Harrison Ford’s Submarine,” 2002).

In various interviews Bigelow emphasized her intention to create a respectful portrayal of the submariners and the tragic events that occurred aboard K-19 in 1961. According to her, the film examined “the heroism, courage and prowess of the Soviet submarine force in ways never seen before” (A Feminist at Sea, 2002). It was an opportunity “to look at the courage and the bravery and the humanism and the vulnerability of what was, for many decades, our enemy” (Vancheri, 2002a), “to re-evaluate the us vs. them paranoia in the hope that we don’t repeat mistakes we’ve made in the past” (Arnoldi, 2002). The story “...was not only a vital slice of history, but also an opportunity to excavate the Russian military psyche at that time, which would give us an opportunity to look at ourselves through the eyes of the enemy” (Elrick, 2002). Bigelow went on to say that

...what is important with this film, is that the younger Russian generations realize that the virtue of their culture and country are not only appreciated within the geographic confines of their own country...That, in fact, that appreciation is world wide. (Ibid.)

Like Bigelow, Harrison Ford, who in addition to playing the main character is also credited as executive producer of “K-19: the Widowmaker,” emphasized that he “felt a duty to portray them [submariners] as they were” (Vincent, 2002a). In his opinion it was very important for the script not to be weakened “either by changing the perspective to that of the Americans” or by distorting the actual events. By becoming the film’s executive producer he wanted to “be assured my voice would be heard in the process” (Lawson, 2002a).

It has very particular and different ambitions than most of what we see. In fact, I can't think of a precedent: an American film that's telling a story of another culture without American characters or an American editorial point of view (Strickler, 2002).

Ford made several trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg trying to reach an understanding with the elderly veterans. Elaborating on the contradictions that arose regarding the script Ford agreed that its early version, the one that was obtained by the veterans, didn’t represent what he was hoping would be the final product. In an interview to *The Los Angeles Daily News*, he explained his view of the conflict and the motivation behind the film’s dramatization of the actual events:

...they're submariners; they're not filmmakers. They're Russians; they're not North Americans. They lead a much different life, and I think that their immediate reaction was that we should be telling their stories with their characters, as they understood them. [...] that's really not the purpose of a theatrical motion picture. Besides, a submarine is compartmentalized; each

section is sealed off from the next section. So no two stories from the men who were there were the same. And because this was immediately declared the stuff of secrets, and it wasn't discussed afterward, it was hard to even just figure out what really happened. (Strauss, 2002)

Still, Ford emphasized, he and the crew “were absolutely committed to telling the story of their devotion to duty, their heroism, their selflessness” (Ibid.). The situation changed dramatically when the veterans saw the finished piece at its St. Petersburg’s premiere, where they were flown from all over the country at the expense of the film’s distribution company. Although the submariners observed that the film had many technical inaccuracies, the overall reception was largely very positive. They gave the film a standing ovation during its lengthy ending credits. Some of them were crying (c.f. Titova, 2002; Malyukova, 2002). Many of the veterans praised the acting of Ford and Neeson and admitted that “K-19: the Widowmaker” was the first Hollywood movie they had seen that “was reasonably authentic and not biased against Russians” (Titova, 2002). The film also received a lot of praise in the Russian press (e.g. Milukova, 2002; Kichin, 2002).

Reviews. The reviews differed in their overall assessment of the film as well as in their estimation of its components such as Kathryn Bigelow’s directorial work, the film’s screenplay, cinematography, acting, factual accuracy, etc. If, for instance, for *The Detroit Free Press* reviewer “K-19: the Widowmaker” “is easily her [Bigelow’s] best film, as intelligent as it is suspenseful,” (Lawson, 2002b), for the *USA Today* critic “K-

19: the Widowmaker” is a “second-rate” movie, a “dicey screen material that only a genius should touch” (Clark, 2002).

Out of 52 reviews analyzed, the overwhelming majority addressed (mentioned) the issue of depiction of the Russian characters in the film (e.g., Scott, 2002; Hunter, 2002; Westbrook, 2002; Moore, 2002). Only 12 (23%) completely ignored this topic – they mentioned the fact that the characters portrayed in the film were Russian, but didn’t express their attitude to how these characters were presented.

The typical definition in the assessment of the film’s novelty was, in accordance with the filmmakers’ intentions, that “K-19: the Widowmaker” presented the Russian point of view, humanized the former enemy, thus allowing the American audience to identify with it (e.g. Ebert, 2002; Vincent, 2002b; Bruner, 2002), becoming one of the film’s “most urgent ... claims to wide attention” (Stark, 2002). Moreover, a number of critics underlined that fact as a proof of improvement in relations between the two countries. *The New York Times* critic, for example, viewed “K-19: the Widowmaker” as “the latest evidence that the cold war has faded into history” (Scott, 2002). Similar evaluations were present in other reviews as well.

The San Francisco Chronicle: “That “K-19: the Widowmaker” could be made at all is a testament to improved relations between the United States and Russia. With the Cold War now history, we can now look back and admit the humanity of the other side” (LaSalle, 2002).

The Chicago Tribune: “The movie, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, is an unusual American tribute to the characters who would have been villains during the Red Scare movie era of the early '60s” (Wilmington, 2002).

The Dayton Daily News: “K-19: The Widowmaker” is a sober tribute to the men who served aboard the vessel and fought to avoid war during one of the most dangerous times in modern history” (Larsen, 2002).

The Des Moines Register:

The heroism and sacrifice that follow are extraordinary and moving, an achievement for a film told entirely from the Russian perspective. It's even more impressive that you'll care deeply about the fate of a group of men that 40 years ago were America's sworn enemies (Bruner, 2002).

Some critics, although, adhered to the opposite opinion. Meyer (2002) of *Sarasota Herald Tribune* questioned the film's idea of turning Cold War Russians into heroes, and consequently the chance that American audience would empathize with them.

It [the reactor] threatens to blow up the Soviets, which, uh, is sort of what all America was primed to do for about 40 years. Did the filmmakers think we'd forget all that and, in our hearts where we build heroes and villains, switch sides? (Meyer, 2002)

Similarly, *The Worcester Telegram & Gazette* reviewer observed that the film didn't give the audience any reason why it should care about the submariners, arguing that the events shown in “K-19: the Widowmaker” are “not important enough to be of

historical interest except to those who care about Soviet military history” (Kimmel, 2002).

A number of reviewers further criticized the film for making its characters too heroic (e.g. Toppman, 2002; Elliott, 2002) and even creating new stereotypes of Russians (Lovell, 2002). The film “celebrates heroism with such a zeal for conventional emotional closure it might as well have been made under the old Soviet system that created K-19's problems in the first place” (Turan, 2002).

Of the reviewers who addressed the Russian issue, only six didn't present a specific judgment of their own as to whether the depiction was appropriate/correct or plausible (Simon, 2002; Scott, 2002; Vincent, 2002; Bruner, 2002; Gillespie, 2002; Lawson, 2002b). Most of the rest of the reviewers concluded, with different degrees of certainty, that the depiction of the Russian characters wasn't convincing enough (e.g. Bernard, 2002; Wilmington, 2002; Toppman, 2002; LaSalle, 2002).

Only three critics completely accepted the representation of Russians as appropriate and plausible (Ebert, 2002; Williams, 2002; Moore, 2002). Generally, the reviewers drew a distinction between the filmmakers' idea to create a film that would portray the Russian submariners as heroes while at the same time helping an American audience identify with them.

In this regard, of special interest seems a repetitive comparison of “K-19: the Widowmaker” to “Das Boot,” a 1981 film directed by Wolfgang Petersen and viewed by many critics as a high quality standard for submarine movie genre (e.g., Turan, 2002; Vancheri, 2002; Gillespie, 2002). Comparing the two pictures on the genre level, the

critics predominantly treated Bigelow's film as secondary to "Das Boot," with the most flattering grade being "a worthy successor" (Garner, 2002). But "Das Boot" is not only a submarine movie; it is also a movie that presents a group ordinarily considered an arch enemy — German Nazi soldiers — in a realistic but sympathetic light. So does "K-19: the Widowmaker" with the Cold War Russian sailors. A number of critics noted that similarity in their reviews, emphasizing that in both films the former enemy is humanized (e.g., Ebert, 2002; Gillespie, 2002; Stark, 2002). Although that kind of notion might seem obvious to critics and experienced film viewers, in our opinion it is rather arguable. What at first may look like a succession in the approach to portrayal of an enemy is not quite a succession. True, audiences of both "K-19: the Widowmaker" and "Das Boot" are supposed to be compassionate to the characters they normally wouldn't; the former enemies are presented as merely human. But the comparison doesn't quite hold up under closer examination simply because the two films were produced in two different contexts. "Das Boot" is self-addressed, i.e., it is a German movie dealing with German history and aimed, first of all, at German audience (originally, "Das Boot" was planned to be a TV series and later re-cut to a full-length feature). The "other" in Petersen's film is German culture's contemplation of itself at a certain moment in its past; it's a retrospective self-reflection. Unlike "Das Boot," Bigelow's film is directed outward and is exploring another culture, its history and mentality — a task, in our opinion, significantly more difficult.

Another noteworthy nuance in the difference between the two films is that German submariners in "Das Boot" were contemptuous of the Nazis, while all aboard K-

19 are unquestionably loyal communists, including the captain with whom American audiences are meant to identify. Among the critics who somehow included a reference to “Das Boot” in their reviews, only one was observant of this important fact (Lawson, 2002).

Among other kinds of support that critics used in their evaluations, the following ones were used frequently: the film’s relationship to historical events that served as the basis for the screenplay, casting Harrison Ford for the main role, and the use of accents.

Relation to Historical Events. The construction of K-19 was started in 1958. It was to become the Soviet Union’s first nuclear submarine able to carry ballistic missiles. Fatal accidents started to happen on the submarine before even it touched the water (Chamberlain and Gupton, 2002-ref to Nat Geo site K-19 and other subs in peril, see credits link). The construction and testing of K-19 and other submarines was rushed by the Soviet government as a response to the American Polaris missile submarines, the first of which, USS George Washington, was launched in November, 1960 (K-19, 2002; Huchthausen, 2002). According to Nickolay Zateyev, captain of K-19, this rush resulted in a fleet of submarines not fit for combat (Chamberlain and Gupton, 2002).

During the sea tests K-19 suffered a number of malfunctions, the reasons for which were primarily in its workmanship. On June 18, 1961 K-19 departed on its first mission, in which it was supposed to play the role of a U.S. attacker. The submarine was ordered to enter the Atlantic undetected by NATO forces and wait for a command from Moscow. Then it was to return to the Barents Sea and imitate attack on Russia in a practice missile strike. It was during that mission, when K-19 was in the vicinity of Jan

Mayen Island off Norway and 1500 miles away from home, when the reactor cooler sprang a leak. If the problem wasn't fixed immediately, the reactor would have suffered a meltdown that in its turn could have led to a thermal explosion. Arguably, taking into consideration the extremely tense relations between the two countries, such explosion in the vicinity of the United States could have accelerated a military confrontation between the Super Powers, and possibly lead to World War III. (In the film, that possibility is accentuated by the presence of a U.S. warship that would undoubtedly be destroyed had the explosion happened.) Knowingly subjecting themselves to the lethal doses of radiation, several volunteers from the crew went inside the reactor compartment to do the repair works. According to other crew members, many of those who went to the reactor were dying in agony on the way back, begging their shipmates to kill them (Bivens, 1993).

There was no way the sub could return to its home port by itself, all the crew members would die in the week it would take to get there. Abandoning the boat at Jan Mayen wasn't an option either. Fortunately, K-19 was spotted by other Soviet submarines. The crew members were evacuated and the submarine itself was towed to Polyarny, near Murmansk. Within days eight veterans of K-19's inaugural mission died of radiation poisoning. Fourteen more died in the next two years. The remaining 117 suffered varying degrees of radiation-related illness. An investigation of the incident cleared the crew and Captain Zateyev of any wrongdoing. Some crew members were decorated for their actions, but because the accident was a state secret, the reasons for the decorations were vague. Many crew members were never honored (Chamberlain and

Gupton, 2002). In February 2006, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev proposed to nominate the crew of K-19 for a Nobel Peace Prize (Peshkov, 2006).

Bigelow's film merges together the sea trials and the first mission into one voyage. The opening credits mention that the picture is "inspired by actual events." Bigelow admitted the difference between the screenplay, a work of fiction, and the actual events it was based on, arguing that "for a dramatic piece that must require some compression, it definitely fulfils a promise of authenticity" ("K-19: The Widowmaker," 2002).

Although all the reviewers admitted the historical base of the film, their attitude to the inspired-by-actual-events approach of the filmmakers differed. They either played it up as a significant achievement and a claim to attention that added authenticity to the depicted characters or criticized it as a way for the filmmakers to arbitrarily interpret the facts.

The fact that the story of "K-19: the Widowmaker" was based on actual events that were undisclosed for years contributed to the evaluations expressed by a number of reviewers (e.g. LaSalle, 2002; Gillespie, 2002; Ross, 2002). In regards to that, Denerstein (2002) of *The Rocky Mountain News* pointed out that "the filmmakers expected the movie to play as revelation." For *The Chicago Tribune* critic, the film's real-life basis struck him "as absorbing and honestly scary" (Wilmington, 2002).

Similarly, *The Plain Dealer* critic noted:

"K-19: the Widowmaker" is based on actual events — events that were not known outside the Kremlin walls until after the Cold War ended — and that

makes a huge difference. The knowledge that this REALLY happened, and is probably still happening, in various scenarios, all over the world, makes it a new kind of horror movie (Connors, 2002).

Other critics, on the contrary, dismissed the inspired-by approach as shaky, not living up to its promise. The resulting film “has a slick, too carefully made Hollywood look and the usual Hollywood embellishments” (Janusonis, 2002); “delivers Hollywood heroics, stock characters and heavy-handed sentimentality in a handsome but repetitive production. [...] slides over pesky details the way Soviet history books did over inconvenient facts” (Toppman, 2002).

When the film was in pre-production, another major Russian submarine drama occurred. On August 12, 2000, Kursk, one of the country's most advanced submarines exploded and sank, killing 118 men aboard. The tragedy was widely reported in the media all over the world. “K-19: the Widowmaker” was released two years later. However, only two critics accentuated the recent disaster in relation to the film in their reviews. Moore (2002) of *Orlando Sentinel* noted that “K-19: the Widowmaker” is “a film that has the ring of truth about it, thanks to the loss of the Russian submarine Kursk and revelations about what caused that sinking.” Larsen (2002) of *The Dayton Daily News* expressed a similar opinion.

Harrison Ford. In “K-19: the Widowmaker,” Harrison Ford, one of the most popular actors of American cinema, plays a Russian. The majority of the reviewers have taken into consideration that fact and somehow included it in their evaluations of the

film. Portrayal of a Russian character by Liam Neeson, Ford's Irish costar in the film, received significantly less attention from the reviewers.

Critics differed in their opinions as to whether the casting of Ford for the main role presented an obstacle in viewing his character as Russian. They also differed in their views of Ford's acting in the film and his being plausible as a captain of the Russian submarine.

Harrison Ford started his acting career in the 1970s and is probably most known for his charismatic characters of Han Solo from the "Star Wars," Jack Ryan of "Patriot Games" and "Clear and Present Danger," and most notably for Indiana Jones in the Indiana Jones trilogy directed by Steven Spielberg.

As many critics noted, Ford is a quintessential American. In "Air Force One" he even played a president of the United States who had to fight Russian terrorists. He is "the very embodiment of can-do American heroism" and "the square-jawed action-hero commander in chief" (Scott, 2002), "a face for cereal boxes and dollar bills" (Kehr, 2002).

Bigelow defended her casting choice to further prove her intention to create an image of Russians that American audience would be able to identify with. In one of her interviews she noted: "At the time, the Soviets were our enemy. Yet when you cast familiar actors, you have to ask what 'us' and 'them' mean. There is only one 'us' — these events have an effect on all of us" (Elias, 2002).

A number of reviewers, although varied in their estimations of nuances of Ford's performance gave an overall positive evaluation to his work in the film (e.g. Ebert, 2002;

Gillespie, 2002; Simon, 2002; McGurk, 2002; Rickey, 2002). For example, Wilmington (2002) of *The Chicago Tribune* noted that although Ford, as well as Neeson, was not very convincing as Russian, his character wasn't "simply another Ford all-American hero with an Oscar Homolka accent," and that his status served to "perform an amazing cultural transformation" in creating the film's pro-Russian message. Baltake (2002) of *The Sacramento Bee* gave praise to Ford for "technically correct performance as the stern Russian captain." Similarly, Garner (2002) of *The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* characterized Ford as "believable as a skillful, hard-nosed Soviet sub commander." A reviewer from *The Washington Post* regarded Ford as "surprisingly compelling in his restrained portrait of a stubborn, highly professional man who cares only about his mission and is willing to push his men to the absolute limit to achieve it" (Hunter, 2002).

Still, other reviewers found it difficult to disregard the images Ford created in his previous action film roles. In their opinion, his all-American characters obstructed the plausibility of the character of Captain Vostrikov that Ford played in "K-19: the Widowmaker" (e.g. Wuntch, 2002; Stark, 2002). Macdonald (2002) of *The Seattle Times* observed that the film's novelty of celebrating the heroism of the former enemies of the United States was "watered down by having all-American Ford portraying the submarine's leader." *The St. Petersburg Times* reviewer found Ford's portrayal of Captain Vostrikov stereotypical: "Think back to our Cold War impressions of Russians - dry, humorless, devoid of personality, perpetually harsh - to grasp the outline of Ford's performance" (Persall, 2002). For Rosen (2002) of *The Denver Post* not only Ford's

image of a quintessential American became an obstacle, but also the \$25 million the actor received for the film.

I know you have to separate the actor from his character or no film can work, but it's hard not to think, “That's Harrison Ford talking” when you hear that line [“The jackals have found us.”] The same Harrison Ford who played the U.S. President in “Air Force One.” And then you think of his paycheck.

Accents. With few exceptions, almost all the reviewers noted the use of Russian accents in the film. The cast of “K-19: the Widowmaker” included actors from the United States, Iceland, Canada, England and Russia (K-19 Handbook, p. 5). Obviously, they all speak English with different accents.

As follows from a statement made by Harrison Ford, having a very international cast was one of the reasons why they attempted doing a Russian accent. If they all spoke with the same accent, they would look as members of one ethnic group.

“We’re speaking English with Russian accents and using it for a second language, but we want to remind the audience this is a Russian crew” (Schaefer, 2002). This statement seems somewhat awkward since a Russian crew wouldn’t communicate under normal circumstances with each other in English anyway. It would make much more sense if the actors either spoke Russian or English without any artificial accents. Speaking Russian would be logical and in accordance with the filmmakers’ intention to present a realistic picture of the events that were taking place on a Russian submarine. This, however, would be very difficult to realize from a technical and commercial prospective — either the whole cast would have to learn Russian, or the producers would

have to cast only Russian actors. The use of the Russian language would require subtitling, difficulties with distribution etc. Therefore, the use of English without any accent seems only natural. Also, the movie is produced by American companies and targeted first of all to an American audience for whom English is the most commonly used language. The audience is capable of understanding certain preconditions of dramatic arts, i.e. of understanding the difference between the language physically spoken by actors and foreign characters they portray in a film. The audience can understand that Russians speak English in “K-19: the Widowmaker” just because the actors are native speakers of English in an American movie that is aimed, first of all, at the English-speaking audience. It’s a given thing.

Harrison Ford, who was the main proponent of the use of accents in the film and whose accent gained the most attention of reviewers, however, adhered to a different opinion.

In an interview in *The New York Daily News*, Ford motivated the use of accent by the notion that

...it was important to allow the audience an understanding of what they might have some expectation for, and I say this ironically, a Harrison Ford movie. And go against it... I was very firm about wanting to use the accent, to show that this was not a character based on their expectations of what I would represent (Elias, 2002).

Several scholars and journalists addressed the issue of the use of foreign accents in motion pictures. Lippi-Green (1997), for instance, asserted animated features

produced by Disney can teach children to ethnocentrically discriminate by portraying bad characters with foreign accents. Wenke (1998) supported that assertion in her analysis of several classic and recent Disney features “Aladdin,” “The Lion King,” “Oliver and Company” and “Three Little Pigs.” Gould (1998) paid attention to the use of British accents in American television shows, such as “Friends,” “Ally McBeal,” “South Park” and a number of others. In his article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* he noted that:

It seems there is a certain snob appeal about a British accent that Americans really respond to. The accent bestows an immediate sense of superiority in culture and intellect that the shows' producers and writers can semaphore to the audience with minimal effort (Gould, 1998).

Kehr (1998) of *The New York Times* noted that American pop-culture tends to associate British accent with “uncertain moral status.”

Schiffman (1998) discussed general use of foreign languages and accents in American media as not authentic. In his opinion Hollywood has its own view of the linguistic world:

Since directors and producers and writers are immersed in the “soup” of popular culture, their ideas about language may come straight from there. Or, they represent a version of language use that they themselves have imbibed from other Hollywood representations of it. Or, they may know what we are expecting, and just give it to us the way it's “always done.”

Of special importance for our purposes is Wenke's (1998) conclusion that “the more ethnocentric an individual listener's orientation, the more favorably they would

react to speech of a standard accent, and consequently the less favorably they would react to speech of a regional or foreign accent.”

That leads us to an assumption that having Russian characters speaking English with an exaggerated accent in “K-19: the Widowmaker” might have worked against the filmmakers’ idea of presenting a story of Russians with which American audience would be able to identify.

The reaction of popular-press critics whose reviews were included in this study supports that assumption. Some of them provided rather pungent comments characterizing the accents used in the film as “phony” (Ross, 2002), “awkward” (Reese, 2002), “ersatz” (Wilmington, 2002), “leaky” (Bernard, 2002) and “comical” (Clawson, 2002).

Even the critics who evaluated the film and its message positively viewed accents as an unnecessary distraction, something the audience would have to overcome first (e.g. Ebert, 2002; Simon, 2002; Gillespie, 2002; McGurk, 2002; Vancheri, 2002b; Janusonis, 2002).

More importantly, for some reviewers the use of accents worked against the plausibility of Russian characters portrayed in the film. For example, *The Chicago Tribune* reviewer noted: “As Capt. Alexei Vostrikov (Ford) and his executive officer, Mikhail Polenin (Neeson), they aren't very convincing Russians — their accents oscillate somewhere between Theodore Bikel and Boris Badenoff from the ‘Rocky and Bullwinkle Show’” (Wilmington, 2002). Similarly, Wuntch (2002) of *The Dallas Morning News*

wrote: “At all times, it's impossible to forget that he is Harrison Ford, and when he attempts (and frequently bungles) a Russian accent, the effect is unintentionally funny.”

Others noted that accents might have alienated the viewers and somewhat undermined the film’s message. This perspective can be illustrated by the following comment from *Rocky Mountain News*: “A mélange of accents creates an odd atmosphere aboard the claustrophobic submarine, working against the idea that the story is being told from a purely Russian vantage point” (Denerstein, 2002). A critic from *The Washington Post* had a similar notion:

You might quiver in fear at the prospect of spending two hours under the surface with Ford's bad Russian accent (which consists of all w's being buried beneath his esophagus and transformed into v's, as in "Vhat is going on?"). (Hunter, 2002)

Whitty (2002) of *The Newark Star-Ledger* criticized the whole Hollywood practice of appearing foreign by speaking English with a foreign accent and called it “pretty absurd.” A writer from *The Charlotte Observer* perhaps summarized the issue of the use of accents in the film:

Who decided they should attempt Russian accents? Neeson forgets his, Ford wavers in and out, and real Russians in the cast make the others sound inauthentic. We know these guys are supposed to be Soviet sailors; adding fake accents only reminds us that they're not. (Toppman, 2002)

In summary, this analysis suggests that the film’s relationship to historical events that served as the basis for the screenplay, casting Harrison Ford for the main role, and

the use of accents were frequently considered by popular-press reviewers evaluating the appropriateness of representation of Russians in “K-19: the Widowmaker.”

By addressing this issue per se — no matter how scarce their comments could be — the reviewers brought national representation to light as something worthy of paying attention. If popular press consistently touches upon that subject, chances are the general audience will be more aware of it too. The role of the film critic, as we understand it, is to facilitate an ongoing social discourse about a film, to be a moderator in the dialogue between a work of cinema and its audience. His or her duty is to bring the problematic issues of a film up to a discussion, to increase the audience awareness of them. The audience may agree or disagree with the reviewers, but what important is that the audience starts thinking about things it might have otherwise disregarded. In case of “K-19: the Widowmaker,” by expressing their opinions about the portrayal of the Russian characters in the film, the reviewers might stimulate the general audience to come to a judgment of their own about how good or bad, plausible or implausible the Russians were presented. By doing so consistently, while reviewing films somehow dealing with national representations, popular-press reviewers might contribute to audiences’ becoming more demanding and more critical to the issue and to cinema in general.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

The results of the study witness that “K-19: the Widowmaker” expresses a new attitude in depiction of Russians in popular American cinema. The film doesn’t have a single American character; as many critics noticed, the Cold War Russians are humanized and presented as heroes, American audiences are supposed to identify with them. The main character is played by Harrison Ford, an actor who, in opinion of many reviewers, symbolizes a quintessential American action hero. The negative characters in the film —the Soviet government and military officials and several rebels onboard the submarine —are given significantly less prominence than the positive characters, the sailors who risk their lives to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. Unlike Kathryn Bigelow’s film, the 1966 Norman Jewison picture “The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming” presented Russians as although likeable but nevertheless merely exaggerated comic characters; in the 1990 John McTiernan thriller “The Hunt for Red October” Russia was still an enemy and the few positively portrayed Russians were primarily preoccupied with escaping to America.

The reviews of “K-19: the Widowmaker” analyze for this study show that critics took notice of novelty in representation of Russians displayed in the film and discussed new attitudes in their writing. While differing in their opinions on the depiction of Russians in the film, the reviewers frequently took into consideration the film’s relationship to historical events that served as the basis for the screenplay, casting Harrison Ford for the main role, and the use of accents.

Although press reviews can hardly be hold solely responsible for audiences' choice to see a film — it can also be based on a specific element of the film's marketing campaign (poster art, TV commercials, Web sites, etc.), presence of a familiar actor or actress, word of mouth, or elementary boredom — critics' opinions come to light when audiences want to make an educated choice, and especially when a film contains a relatively unfamiliar or controversial topic, or, as is the case with “K-19: the Widowmaker,” a new approach to a familiar issue, e.g., Cold War.

The fact that the majority of reviewers somehow addressed the representation of Russians in the film might contribute to a creating a new pattern of film evaluation among the audience members. It's especially important that the film in question is a major Hollywood production, a Harrison Ford movie. Popular-press reviews of mainstream pictures, unlike those in specialized and scholarly publications, usually disregarded the issue of national representations, tending to explain any exaggerations as attributes of a particular genre.

It's been noted that film reviews may be a means through which selective exposure is carried out; they can act as primers that shape the audiences' interpretation of films when they decide to see them (Hall, 2001). Thus we can assume that, if popular-press reviewers will be more critical to what they review and will be consistently addressing various issues presented in a film, e.g. the issue of national representations, over time audiences can adopt their approach in their evaluations as well and become more critical to what they see on a big screen. Therefore, a possible venue for future

research is a study of the role that popular press plays in maintaining or challenging the existing patterns of national representations in cinema.

This study is an observation of a singular example of how one culture is perceived and interpreted by another through the means of cinema. Similar studies can be conducted using other films, other forms of art, and other cultures. In their turn, they could lead to a larger research of the social, cultural, political, economical mechanisms involved in interpretation of one culture by another. Is true understanding of one culture by another possible? Is appropriate representation possible, or is it always intrinsically biased one way or another, due to the immanent difference between the self-consciousness of the interpreted culture and the interpreting culture's limited means of accessing it? It is always easier to present a different culture using already existing notions of it, even at the risk of creating one-dimensional and false images, rather than to explore that culture on one's own. The latter requires at minimum a serious willingness to understand the culture in question, and sometimes years of research. A perfect result cannot be guaranteed even in that case, but it is the attempt that counts.

In case of "K-19: the Widowmaker," it is especially pleasant to admit that Kathryn Bigelow, notwithstanding all the limitations of big-budget Hollywood filmmaking, has tried to present, in a non-patronizing manner, a kind of Russians no one in Hollywood has seen before. As one critic noted, "at its best, the film almost makes you feel proud to have been a Soviet communist, — even if you weren't" (Rosen, 2002).

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