The Soviet Western and critique: “unrelenting ideological battle” and “expanding cultural contacts”

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“I saw the movie ‘The Magnificent Seven’. The artists involved in it acted well”, so said Nikita Khrushchev in an interview with an American journalist in July 1962. Khrushchev allowed the showing of the Magnificent Seven in that same year. It was among the best-selling movies of that year, spawning a popular fascination for the Western genre of cinema in the Soviet Union. However, the license for showing the movie was rescinded in 1963, 10 months before it was due to expire, despite its immense viewership of 63.7 million people, and without any explanation given.

In the years that followed, Soviet filmmakers produced their own films to appeal to the popular fascination with the Western film. These films have been coined as ‘isterns’, Westerns set in a Soviet context – usually during the Russian Civil war, in the theatres of war in Ukraine or central Asia. These are ‘Westerns’ transplanted and adapted into a Soviet context. The features of the Western are evident in these movies: the arid landscape, the strong and silent hero, a juxtaposition between good and evil, the horses, and many other stylistic features frequent in Westerns.

Yet there is a clear ideological problem with the American Western, which established the American national myth of the rugged individualist. How could the Soviets deal with this problem, while maintaining this appealing Hollywood genre? Throughout the 1970s, a homegrown take on the Western became a part of popular cinema in the Soviet Union. As Sergei Zhuk puts it, “Soviet ideologists considered these Russian films to be an antidote to ‘the cowboy film mania’ among Soviet youth.” Cinema – as cultural diplomacy between the USA and Brezhenev’s Soviet Union – is a powerful example of the tensions left unresolved in the Cold War battle for popular imagination.

3 F. Razzakov, Gibel’ sovetskogo kino (Moscow, 2008), p. 160.
4 Zhuk.
Officially, cinema was designated as a way of instilling Soviet values. The leading film journal, *Iskusstvo kino* and *Soveksportfil’m*, the body responsible for the import of foreign films to the Soviet Union, officially condoned popular entertainment movies – and the official remit for the Moscow International Film Festival (MIFF) was to find “the best representatives of the progressive, anti-capitalist, anti-war and humanist American cinema”. Yet audiences were not drawn towards ‘anti-capitalist’ Soviet cinema, and the films imported from the USA tended to almost exclusively be entertainment films, musicals, and blockbusters. The popularity of these films meant that they were financially lucrative for the state film industry.

In the 1970s, adventure, comedy, and musical films, though there are many fewer of them, outgrossed serious movies with contemporary settings by over 200 percent. The Soviet government viewed these films, overwhelmingly imported, as a way of compensating for a deficit in entertainment at the movies, but also simultaneously “represent a mass culture that, by Soviet standards, is far from ideal or not even quite healthy”.

The 1970s saw the growth of ‘American studies’ as a field of academic interest in the USSR. Interest even went as far as the publication of a comparative review, for *Iskusstvo Kino* in 1977, of the works of different Soviet ‘Americanists’. The writers exercises caution in talking about American culture, and two reasons are given for why studying and engaging with Hollywood is not inconsistent with Soviet values: “сегодня сфера кино - это одновременно и аrena неослабевающей идеологической борьбы, и область расширяющихся культурных контактов.” It is this uneasy relationship between an “arena of unrelenting ideological battle” and a “site of expanding cultural contacts” that nicely summarises the state of the cultural and political elite’s attitude towards American cinema in the 1970s. The popular appeal and success of these Soviet Westerns led to sections of the intelligentsia to rally against the influence of an alien, capitalist, American, genre on Soviet viewers.

The Western, as a popular genre, raises questions about the gap between cultural and political elites and ordinary people, and the function of cinema in the Soviet Union under Brezhnev. Konstantin Shcherbakov, the son of Alexander Shcherbakov one of the founding members of Gorky’s Soviet Writers’ Union, was a Soviet film critic and future editor of *Iskusstvo kino*. Writing for

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6 ibid., p. 76.
7 “The realm of cinema today – it is simultaneously both an arena of unrelenting ideological battle, and a site of expanding cultural contacts”
Iskusstvo kino in 1967. He lamented that “we are bringing up a generation which is raised on such insipid, knowingly second rate, cinematic.” He admits to the place for action films like The Magnificent Seven, but argues that genre films are essentially inferior to the “высоким требованиям критики” attached to Soviet classics. Film critics viewed their role as educational, as part of the mission of delivering Soviet values to the masses through shaping art. ‘The Paper and the Screen’ section of Pravda in a 1963 makes abundantly clear that by “analysing significant films the press helps in the moral and aesthetic education of Soviet viewer”.

Soviet publications featured numerous criticisms of the Magnificent Seven which, while criticising the film as a work of commercial American fodder, admitted to the potentially devastating social effects of the popularity of the film. In The Artemovsk Worker, a letter from a journalism student at Tashkent University, V. Mikhnevich, wrote that “ковбои — это социальное зло южноамериканских штатов, порождаемое вечной безработицей.” Criticisms like this fall into the common Soviet attack on American culture as perpetuation capitalist oppression and other ‘social evils’. Yet, these critics not only attacked the perceived values of the Western but recognised the potentially dangerous effect of these films on Soviet popular culture and society. In an article in the Khabarovsky newspaper “The Young Far-Eastern” in 1964, the writer wrote about film being full of “false shine” (lozhnogo bleska). Yet at the same time, he wrote that it was “Напрасно. Все напрасно. Никто не остановит семерку храбрецов.” Critics linked fears of the ‘unstoppability’ (не остановит) of the film to the implications for wider social values: “это искусно прикрытая художественностью беспринципная демагогия о преимуществах американского образа жизни”. The influence of the Magnificent Seven was such that people began to learn by

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9 ibid.
“Анализируя значительные кинофильмы, печать поможет нравственному и эстетическому воспитанию советского зрителя.”
11 “Cowboys – they are a social evil of the southern US states, engendered by everlasting unemployment.” S. Lavrentiev, Krasniy Vestern. p. 82.
12 “In vain. It’s all in vain. No one can stop these brave Seven.” ibid.
13 ibid.
“it is unscrupulous demagoguery, skilfully concealed with artistry, about the benefits of the American lifestyle.”
heart key phrases from the film, exchanged between Steve McQueen and Yul Brynner. An article in the August 1962 edition of the mass-produced popular glossy film magazine, *Sovetskyi Ekran*, condemned the violence of *The Magnificent Seven*, arguing that if we consider the educational role of a given film, in this instance “то молодежи он может принести больше вреда, чем пользы.”

The Soviet versions of Westerns were criticised for the way they utilised a foreign genre and in the process of doing so lost their artistic (e.g. partiinost) ideals. Writing in *Iskusstvo Kino*, a reviewer criticised the the lack of ‘traditional typological figures of moral and social pedigree’ in Mikhalkov’s *At Home Among Strangers* (one such Soviet Western). She goes on to argue that the creators failed to realise that their intended search for truth is replaced by whatever is the most beautiful, which she says is a ‘surrogate for art’. “Стилизация оборачивается эстетизацией.” The core claim of critics like Stishova is that the western genre imposes constraints and formulas on the Soviet filmmaker that make it difficult to create truly great art, which pursues the ‘truth’. Moreover when Soviet Westerns are praised by film critics, their use of genre is praised only insofar as it is a partial parody or subversion. Thus, a review of *White Sun of the Desert* (another Soviet Western) praises the film for being self-aware of the conventions and tropes of the Western and parodying them, although explicitly says that it is not a parody of the genre but instead of the features of the genre. Furthermore, the critic ends the review by saying that “Давно пора потягаться с "Великолепной семеркой". В открытом бою”. Genre was criticised for its conventions in the Soviet Western, but that did not stop Soviet Westerns that utilised genre in ‘unconventional’ or ‘parodying’ ways to attract critical support as effective counter-material (even partiinost), in the Cold War battle for, and evidently subversion of, culture.

The need to study the enemy, to understand American culture and values, is a crucial part of the cultural-political mission of these film critics and journalists. Yet the need to understand is in instance blurred with a genuine fascination and intrigue. In a 1974 edition of Pravda, a piece was written *Kovboi, kak oni yest’* (Cowboys – as they are) by two Soviet ‘special’ American correspondents. The piece looks at modern day cowboys, their nearest equivalents, in Wyoming. It

is notable that the piece does not demonise American culture and the ‘kovboy’ as being anything negative in what he represents. Instead, it paints a relatively benign portrait of the cowboy, and outlines its origins and development. In terms of politics, the closest it gets to commenting on Soviet-American relations is the mention that the Wyoming cowboys wanted to emphasise to the Pravda journalists that they did not want war to break out between their two countries.

Critical interpretations of the American Western and the Soviet Western reveal a double-edged sword: fear of the social values underlying the Western genre, and fascination with the ‘kovboy’ and his ability to capture popular Soviet imaginations. The sovietisation of genre generated immensely popular films, but also caused inherent problems because of the underlying difficulties of reconciling ‘Soviet values’ with genre films, but also the specific problems of the Western genre. As Bohlinger puts it, one “fundamental problem facing any Soviet Western, then, is that the Western is simply far too Western a genre framework far too emblematic, in the Soviet era, of the culture of the enemy”. The Soviet Western in the 1960s and 1970s was one attempt to help create citizens through cultural output, requiring a balance between entertainment and ideology. We ought to consider today, in an era of new tensions but without totalising ideological conflict, whether cinema is playing any role in the escalation of tensions or whether it is acting as a conduit for cultural exchange: the two need not be mutually exclusive.

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