GOOD VS. EVIL: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOVIET ‘OTHERNESS’ IN ROCKY IV

JOAQUÍN SARAVIA
INSTITUTO FRANKLIN–UAH

Both the Vietnam War disaster (1955-1975) and the Watergate scandal (1972-1974) had a negative impact in the self-perception of US citizens. As many other cultural manifestations, American films portrayed a sense of defeat in the Cold War context. That was the case of Rocky (1976) and Rocky II (1979), both patriotic and propagandistic calls to individual participation in the national renaissance (Hoff 1999, 187). Aiming at cheering up the nation, the advent of the Reagan administration brought big changes in the configuration of the US collective imaginary; pre-established ideas regarding the Soviet Union as an evil empire, a conservative reconstruction of society and new fictional heroes to save the nation were brought forth. Hirshberg states that, during the 80’s, the screenwriter of the Rocky series, Sylvester Stallone, supported the administration’s philosophy of “peace through strength” both openly and actively (1993, 104).

In this regard, the most explicit example of Stallone’s commitment to the cause is the ideological message expressed through Rocky IV (1985), in which an exhibition bout ends in tragedy as Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) dies after boxing Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren). Consequently, Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone) accepts Drago’s challenge to compete in Russia. For the first time, the hero does not fight for love, wealth, pride or honor. Instead, Rocky becomes a soldier who fights a cultural war for the survival of the American Way of Life and liberal democracy. Paralleling the political developments of the time, a sports drama film was used as a cultural weapon in the Cold War struggle.

Several scholars have focused on Rocky IV during the last decades (Salyer Jr. 2009, Walsh 2015, Hilby, Stephens and Stripling 2016, Tholas-Disset 2017). This article will draw chiefly on the work done by Fiamengo (2010)—who considers the film as a propagandistic mechanism—as well as Junior (2016) and Yüksel (2018), who assert that it
functions as a soft power tool\(^1\). The present analysis will establish dialogues with the aforementioned works to complement and deepen their findings. Rather than focusing on the script, it will analyze the visual mechanisms that, taking profit of the hegemony of Christian imagery in the Western World, are used to establish a dichotomic opposition based on the construction of a good ‘us’ (the US) and an evil ‘them’ (the USSR).

The main methodological device used to achieve such a goal is the constant use of binary oppositions. Evelyn F. Keller explains that certain people understand their reality through binary thinking, a cognitive process that simplifies the understanding of things through differentiation and opposition. In consequence, binary thinking can facilitate the assimilation of stereotypes and prejudices that are difficult to deconstruct (1985, 8). *Rocky IV* takes profit of the context of political and cultural polarization present during the Cold War by reaching out to a global audience that was eager to find relief in such uncertain times.

An example of how the American ‘us’ has been visually constructed can be found in the Apollo vs. Drago match entrance scene. The MGM Grand in Las Vegas, Nevada, is not only a classic boxing arena, but also a symbol of American wealth, freedom and

---

\(^1\) Joseph Nye states that “soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments” (1985, 256).
excess (embodied by gambling, drugs, consumerism, and so on); in *Rocky IV*, it functions as a microcosm representing the United States. The configuration of both the audience and the work staff of the arena is also based on propagandistic symbols transmitting an intentional image. On the one hand, the former is composed by thousands of people belonging to a multicultural upper social class — as indicated by their luxurious attires — surrounded by golden lights that reinforce the sensation of economic power. They are not mere spectators: they are excited, dynamic, diverse, and prosperous free individuals that interact and coexist in peace. On the other hand, the arena staff consists in a multiethnic group of dancers and musicians, a segment of the population belonging to lower social classes that make the prosperous party possible but, at the same time, participate in the patriotic celebration (figure 1).

A positive portrayal of America’s patriotic diversity is constantly used to articulate and get across political messages. In this case, multiethnic patriotism is embodied in the Apollo team formed by two Italians (Rocky and Polly) and an African American (Tony Ever). In addition, they are sponsored by Hugo Boss, the West German clothing brand. This seemingly harmless depiction of how sports are sponsored also works as
a symbolic device (figure 2). Why? The policy developed by the United States towards the Soviet Union was implemented in order to stop the alleged spread of communist parties in Western Europe. Thus, the Marshall Plan (1948-1952) turned the prosperity of West Germany through industrial potential and free market into the main propagandistic tool of the American model in Europe. Furthermore, it also connects with a prosperous transnational reality based on the assumed values of democracy, consumerism, capitalism and openness to the world. Of course, it also sends the message that those who align with the US prosper and that West Germany is under American influence.

Although the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ opposition is constructed using the audience, the struggle between nations is embodied by the boxers in one on one matches. As the analysis will further demonstrate, Christian imagery plays a fundamental role in the creation of the dichotomic reality, specifically in outlining the division between a good ‘us’ and an evil ‘them’. The embodiment of the latter’s ‘otherness’ is Ivan Drago.

Critics such as Lopes and Brock describe Drago as “a giant with demonic spiked hair who looks like an indestructible fighting machine” (2015). The former depiction is effectively used in Drago’s characterization as the hellish ‘other’. Drawing on Keller’s definition of differentiation and opposition as fundamental processes of binary thinking, the Russian is presented as the embodiment of the opposition to American values. The above photogram shows that the Soviet boxer—representative of the devil—feels comfortable in the depths of the tranquil, silent, and isolated cage—hell—from which he emerges. The opposite happens when he enters America—heaven—what is shown by his body language—specially his dizzy, irritated and incredulous gestures—his
discomfort is reinforced by the several camera angles arranged through vertiginous shot transitions (figure 3). The visual composition conveys two main messages that establish the binary division and the characteristics of the ‘other’. First, that he (the Soviet Union) is not used to nor enjoys that kind of manifestations of wealth, diversity, and freedom. Second, that Drago is comparable to a dangerous trapped beast whose presence means a threat to the American Way of Life.

The forces of good also have their own champion: Apollo Creed. Although the matter would deserve a specific analysis, Rocky IV is the only film in the Rocky series in which African Americans are not depicted as the embodiment of negative values that threaten the prosperity of the American society. In the former installments, Creed was eventually portrayed in a positive way after recognizing Rocky’s superiority, retiring and becoming the champion’s trainer. Therefore, Apollo resigned to play the role of the hero’s helper, leaving the spotlight that only the embodiment of white American values deserves. In Rocky IV, the US domestic sociopolitical problems are left aside in the pursuit of common good and the fight against the external enemy. To defeat the Soviet Union, America had to project an image of union both inside and outside of its frontiers, and that is why Apollo, the tamed member of a minority, is constructed in the fourth film—as Junior (2016) and Yüksel (2018) explain—as the representation of America.
Following the film’s logic of binary oppositions, if Drago is a devil, Apollo is an angel. In the same way, if the depth is hell, what is above is heaven. Apollo’s primacy is constructed through the low-angle shot, while his shiny clothes and highlighted physical strength render him like the divine guardian who will protect America (figure 4).

In contrast with the robotic, static and reluctant behavior of Drago, Apollo adopts the dynamic, celebratory, and provocative behavior of the audience, the dancers, and the musicians. Moreover, Creed is dressed in an Uncle Sam costume; in this match against the Soviet opponent he is not only a sportsman, he is also a soldier who will protect the free world from communism. His attire also functions as a cohesive device. A considerable number of African Americans refused to combat in American 20th century wars because their service and rights were not recognized, a matter that created a strong link between the civil rights movement (1954-1968) and the antiwar platforms. In 1985, it was necessary to attract the minorities to the cause. Apollo’s attire and leadership are both recognitions of the national need for multiethnic unity.

After its release, several Soviet cultural officials complained about American films, and specially Rocky IV, for using popular culture to spread hatred and terror worldwide. Thus, it was interpreted as an intent to portray the Soviet Union as the “evil empire”, using Ivan Drago as the main tool to associate what Soviet officials considered inexistent and artificial values such as rigidity and uniformity to the Eastern Culture (Romano 2004, 173). The previously analyzed MGM scene gives some hints about how that was visually constructed. However, the most explicit example of how the Soviet Union is portrayed, in Rocky IV, as America’s evil ‘other’ is present at the end of the film, specifically at the Drago vs. Rocky match entrance in Moscow.
The scene begins with a clear change of location regarding both competitors. In this occasion, no boxer emerges from the ground nor descends from the heights, both enter the arena from the lateral sides. This symbolic contraposed placement of the entries exposes the preferred systemic values of the superpowers: meritocracy and equality (figure 5).

In his review, the film critic Palmer affirms that Russia is depicted as a “relentless, emotionless machine” (1995, 219). The Soviet athlete’s appearance is shot from a low-angle that only shows his gigantic shadow, depicting him as a horrific and powerful athlete, which is reinforced when his team steps forward appearing to be only half his size. Unlike Apollo, Drago does not dance, talk, nor interact with anybody, he is static, rigid and uncommunicative, a set of gestures that makes him look like an android (figure 5). Scholar Silverblatt considers that it reflects an alleged “lack of individualism characteristic of the Soviet Union” (2014, 66). Film critics tend to associate Drago with the ‘Terminator’ stereotype a cyborg with a strong body and a limited mind, and to the ‘Frankenstein’ trope, a scientific creation almost incapable of human reactions. Both can be interpreted as a depiction of Marxist ideologies as mechanisms that turn humans into gears of a bigger machine (communism) that nullifies freedom (Hoff 1999, 193).

When Drago starts moving towards the ring, he and the audience are illuminated and a new color becomes protagonist: red. He is complemented with thousands of red Soviet Union flags that break through the obscurity. The sense of isolation, fear, and mystery has been turned into violence, showing that this match is not a spectacle; rather, it is a war. The connections with evil are once again made obvious, the obscure and red-tinted environment created by the flags turn the arena into a hell on earth, and Drago’s gigantic and scary red figure is the devil (figure 5). The opposition, created through the contrast between the two audiences, is a powerful propagandistic device. Whereas the audience of the MGM arena in Las Vegas depicts America as a celebration of individualism and freedom, the spectators of the Soviet boxing hall embody a unified collective identity and equality. As a result, we can barely distinguish between spectators and musicians; both seem to be one uniform entity, as the vast majority is dressed in camouflage green military attire with red details, portraying a classless society based in uniformity, austerity, and sobriety.

Moreover, the previous reflection of the arena as hell associates negative connotations to the Russians. In this context, they are depicted as the army of evil. In addition, it is impossible to distinguish any sign of a multiethnic society, although the Soviet Union included more than a hundred ethnic nationalities and such diversity was considered by national political leaders as “the major force for change” (Rakowska-Harmstone 1997, 73). This omission reinforces the construct of a plain, colorless and constrained reality.
The musical contrast is an additional effective device used when Drago meets both the American and the Russian audience. On the one hand, famous performer James Brown plays rock and roll, a popular genre which has its origins in New Orleans, initially related with lower social classes and blending several genres, fascinating the members of the upper class audience. The shots focus on the singer, his musicians, and the spectators separately, a clear reflection of individualism. On the other hand, the unification of musicians and spectators creates a sense of an inherent collectivism that finds its peak when the Soviet national anthem is played. There is no vocal soloist, no individual artistic manifestation, the voices of the entire arena and the instruments create a chorus that forms one melody.

![Figure 6 Rocky IV (1985)](image)

The orchestration of the Soviet event is highly ideological because the collective soul of the nation imposes over individual freedom through the politicization of art. Another important aspect is that in the MGM arena we do not distinguish any politicians, because America is depicted as the embodiment of democracy and democracy lies in the power of the people. When Apollo descends from the heights, he mixes and interacts with the people, he is not the authority. The complete opposite happens with Drago, who as a man stays at ground level, but as a symbol ascends to the sky. This was conveyed through the huge portrait in which he is looking toward the horizon in
the same way as communist leaders such as Lenin or Stalin would be depicted (figure 6). In their review, critics Lopes and Brock describe this scene as a “Russian spectacle” that is purposely constructed in a pathetic and excessively emotional way to make it seem ridiculous (2015).

Drago’s representation as the almighty champion from hell is so explicit and powerful that little is needed to create his opposition. The metaphor of the cage is once again used, however, the railings, the sentinels and the red lights indicate that the American hero (Rocky) is entering the door to hell. Although the American team wears the national colors, the predominance of white makes explicit their representation as God’s envoys. Moreover, the halo illuminating Rocky uncovers his role as the champion of good. The exploitation of the white color also foreshadows the divine mission of the Italian-American: purifying the Soviet people, which he accomplishes after defeating the forces of evil (figure 7).

The analysis suggests that Rocky IV is a cultural production that transmits simple and direct messages aiming to produce emotional responses. One of the key devices used
to achieve this objective was the creation of binary divisions through the construction of oppositions between positive features, assigned to Americans, and negative ones, related to Soviets.

On the one hand, we could see how Stallone managed to create an image of America that idealized the country by omitting existing confrontations and contradictions such as racism, inequality, poverty, or sexism. Moreover, it assigned positive connotations to controversial values such as individualism, excess or consumerism. The effective use of the visual elements that compose the scenes are able to structure an all-encompassing image that shows America as the land of freedom, opportunities, inclusion, wealth and prosperity. By doing so, the film exploits popular American myths as realities and supports the manifest destiny of the United States of spreading democracy all around the world. On the other hand, Rocky IV is able to turn the complex reality the Soviet Union was into a simplistic embodiment of oppositions and contrasts to American values. The portrayal of Soviets as almost sub-humans who are not able to communicate, think or act by themselves—and the Soviet Union as the factory that creates them to destroy freedom—produced a dehumanization of the competitor for global hegemony. Through this mechanism, the Soviets are presented, thanks to the massive reach of the film, as a dangerous ‘other’ to the entire world. In accordance with the Reagan administration, changing to a more aggressive and diverse strategy to defeat the Soviet Union was not only a necessity, it was also a duty. Voluntarily or not, Rocky IV was an important cultural contribution to polarize public opinion and achieve the goals of the new strategy.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES


