

“Popcorn Diplomacy”: American Blockbusters and World Order

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“The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized.”

Elmer Davis, Director of the United States
Office of War Information

Abstract

U.S.-Russia tensions have been on the rise for years. This article attempts to examine them through the lens of the clash between two different world order paradigms. While Russia advocates multipolarity as the next step away

from unipolarity, the U.S. presses for a “rules-based order built after WWII with the American singular leadership.” The author argues that one of the most powerful public diplomacy instruments in terms of promoting the U.S.-centric paradigm of the world order is blockbusters, referred to herein as “popcorn diplomacy.” The paper offers an insight into how Hollywood movies are linked with Washington’s narrative of the world order. Using the method of the popular geopolitics theory and applying content analysis to several U.S. blockbusters, the author identifies certain techniques that help advance the American perception of the world and mold public opinion to the benefit of U.S. national interests. In conclusion, the article examines the risks and opportunities this policy poses to Russia.

Keywords: world order, U.S., Russia, public diplomacy, hegemony, discourse, motion picture, blockbusters.

WORLD PERCEPTION PARADIGMS AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The Russia-U.S. standoff, which turned from bad to worse with the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, is, among other things, a reflection of the clash between two different world order paradigms. Russia is pushing for a multipolar/polycentric world not only as the most desirable option, but also as a logical one, consonant with all global political changes of recent decades (Baranovsky, 2017; Arbatov, 2014). The United States has repeatedly declared its commitment to a “rules-based world order” or “liberal world order” and vowed to defend it against any attempts to revise it (Blinken, 2022; U.S. National Security Strategy, 2015). The United States perceives Russia as one of the challenges to the world order, which, from its point of view, is more than seventy years old and which is largely determined by American global leadership (Ikenberry, 2018; U.S. National Security Strategy, 2015). Russia, on the contrary, argues that the U.S. stubbornly resists global development due to its egocentric reluctance to abandon the unipolar model that best agrees with the narrative of its own exclusiveness.

In a situation like this, either party is certain about its own righteousness. The United States positions itself as a defender of the

status quo. Any action that contradicts this vision is perceived as a manifestation of revisionism. Russia defends its position not only because it views a transition to a multipolar world as predetermined by development processes, but also due to certain “moral superiority.” In fact, acting within the framework of this paradigm, it defends a system of international relations where all powers are equally subordinate to rules and have equal rights, including in safeguarding their security and national interests.

Since the conflict largely revolves around such aspects as worldview, subjective perception and preferred political discourse, it is not surprising that one of the main frontlines of confrontation lies in the international information field, which determines the narratives that dominate the world and, accordingly, international public opinion. Since 2014, the United States and Russia have repeatedly exchanged accusations of propaganda and disinformation; a variety of legislative initiatives have been adopted to limit the opponent’s ability to influence the public mind (the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act of 2016 in the United States (Act, 2016); the law On Media-Foreign Agents No. 327-FZ of 2017 in Russia (Federal Law, 2017)); both American and Russian international broadcasting channels have intensified their efforts (the launch of the Current Time channel under the auspices of Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America in 2014-2016; the expansion of RT broadcasting: the launch of RT UK in 2014, RT Français in 2017 and RT Deutsch in 2021).

Among the instruments of influence on the global information space and international public opinion, public diplomacy undoubtedly occupies a special place: as a soft power tool it enables countries to attain their political aims.

According to one of the classical definitions, public diplomacy is direct communication with the people of other countries in order to influence their way of thinking and ultimately their governments in the process of promoting national interests and strengthening the international image of one’s own state (Malone, 1985).

The international information field is one of the realms of activity where the United States still has vast opportunities despite some negative

trends. On the one hand, U.S. public diplomacy has been in decline roughly since the end of the Cold War. The systemic crisis largely manifests itself at the institutional level: since 1999, not a single large-scale reform or restructuring of the key institutions of American public diplomacy has been carried out after the respective agency responsible for this type of activity from 1953 to 1999—the U.S. Information Agency (USIA)—was disbanded, and its functions were redistributed between the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM). There are also other signs that the crisis is a hard fact: systematic underfunding of the respective sector; personnel problems, including the frequent change of officials for the post of U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs due to their incompetence; and, most importantly, the low priority of public diplomacy in the strategic vision of the U.S. political leadership (Artamonova, 2021). In practice, the decline of U.S. public diplomacy until recently manifested itself as outbreaks of anti-Americanism in international public opinion that became increasingly frequent in the 21st century—the readiness of the world community to quickly condemn the United States for certain political decisions or events (the invasion of Iraq, Trump’s presidency, the inability to quickly cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan (Blumenthal, 2018; Wike et al., 2018; Pew Research Center, 2020; Sonenshine, 2021).

However, the United States retains dominance in the international information sphere, when it comes to global politics, ideology, and value discourse. This is seen well enough in the unwillingness of the international public to be equally critical of the messages emanating from the United States and the powers that express alternative viewpoints on the issues listed above (mainly Russia and China as the most impressive “preachers” of an alternative paradigm of the world order). The most illustrative example is the information campaign to demonize Russia in the eyes of the world public against the backdrop of the special operation in Ukraine. Although its masterminds are the Western leaders, this media crusade enjoys heavy support of the general public in the U.S. and the EU countries with almost no attempts to look at the events from an alternative angle.

This article focuses on the role of one of the instruments of American public diplomacy that has been least affected by the crisis and stagnation, and in some respects even has seen a leap in development thanks to opportunities provided by globalization and digitalization in the 21st century. Moreover, historically, this is a realm of public diplomacy where the United States has remained unrivaled all along. The article analyzes American cinema as a public diplomacy instrument employed to maintain the significant influence of the United States on international public opinion, as well as the risks and opportunities that open up for Russia due to the transformation of the world order and the information confrontation between the two powers.

The role of movies in the implementation of American public diplomacy, and, in general, its significance in promoting American national interests and maintaining U.S. global leadership is analyzed herein through the lens of two theoretical concepts. The first one is A. Gramsci’s theory of hegemony and his understanding of cultural hegemony as a process in which the ruling class exerts a purposeful impact on the set of ideas, beliefs, values, and norms expressed in the culture of society in order to establish a certain worldview as a generally accepted cultural norm and as a valid dominant ideology (Chernow and Vallasi, 1994). Such an ideology legitimizes the social, political, and economic status quo, which is, in fact, only a social construct, and presents it as a natural and unchanging order of things, equally beneficial to everyone (Bullock and Trombley, 2000). The article projects this theory to the global level, where the place of the ruling class is taken by the dominant world power (the United States), while the place of the dominant ideology of the ruling class is taken by the paradigm of the “rules-based order,” which ensures the indisputability of U.S. hegemony. In accordance with this approach, cinema is seen as part of the toolkit for maintaining U.S. global cultural dominance.

The other concept is the theory of popular geopolitics, a relatively young line of research that focuses on how popular culture (feature films, television programs, soap operas, comics, blogs, etc.) shapes reality through the representation of countries, regions and geopolitical relations, which, in turn, affects the formation of the ideas in the minds

of the public at large (Dittmer, 2010, p. 14). Popular geopolitics is an offshoot of critical geopolitics that specializes in “the conceptualization of geopolitical space, and how structures of power advantage certain discourses over others” (Ó Tuathail et al., 2006, pp. 16–38, cited in Saunders, 2012).

The use of elements of popular geopolitics for the content analysis of U.S. film industry products makes it possible to identify a set of narratives that directly or indirectly support the idea of U.S. global leadership and duplicate the U.S. government’s official views on international politics, security policy, and the position of other states in the world order.

In addition, such content analysis highlights a number of specific techniques that are used in films to construct narratives that plant the American-centric worldview paradigm into the international public mind: manipulations with history (fictional interpretations in depicting historical events, resulting in the distortion of history in favor of the desirable narrative), symbolism (for example, a protagonist-superhero as a symbol of American exceptionalism in global politics), military propaganda (given the importance of the U.S. military-industrial complex in formulating the U.S. foreign policy doctrine), etc.

THE CULTURAL AND ENTERTAINMENT DIMENSION OF U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

In the arsenal of American public diplomacy, cinema has always enjoyed a special place. In terms of the formal structure of government institutions involved in the implementation of public diplomacy, their main lines of activity are related to information and advocacy that are most often realized through foreign broadcasting (The Voice of America, Radio Liberty, etc.) and various exchange programs (Tsvetkova, 2008). Cultural and entertainment activities, with Hollywood movies being their main tool, are a variety of U.S. public diplomacy that is practically not formalized at the legislative and institutional levels.

The legal and regulatory framework of U.S. public diplomacy empowers the executive person in charge (at present the Secretary of State) to attract an almost unlimited circle of individuals and bodies

both from the government and the private sector (Act, 1948). Although examples of the use of cinema by the U.S. government for public diplomacy purposes have been known since the middle of the 20th century, this cooperation largely remains informal to date.

There are three main ways of involving U.S. cinema in campaigns for achieving national interests through public diplomacy: 1) mutually beneficial cooperation between film companies and government institutions (this is the only way that can be formalized in an official agreement); 2) mobilization of the film industry by government agencies for addressing foreign policy problems (carried out at semi-official meetings and conversations between government officials and heads of leading film studios); and 3) filmmakers’ self-censorship exercised in accord with the mainstream political and ideological agenda (it is not all-embracing, i.e., it does not apply to all products of the American film industry) (Artamonova, 2020).

In the first case, film studios get an opportunity to reduce production costs and make their products more authentic (by receiving assistance from, for example, the Pentagon in the form of consultation, equipment or filming locations) in exchange for meeting the partner’s preferences concerning the final product (that is, by promoting a positive image of the CIA, avoiding scenes negative to its repute; or rendering a certain message, for example, the idea of space exploration in cooperation with NASA (Jenkins and Secker, 2022)).

In the second case, the government or individual government officials turn to the filmmakers with a request or proposal to voluntarily support a certain political discourse. The reasons can vary from serious upheavals (during World War I the government requested support for the allies through movies; after 9/11 the White House requested Hollywood to support the War on Terror (CNN, 2022b)) to strategic foreign policy or military plans of the country’s leadership (the U.S. Aerospace Force expressing interest in films that can help promote a campaign or the idea of U.S. military presence in space (Jenkins and Secker, 2022)).

The third way is the least obvious, as it is not tied to specific political events, historical periods, or film genres. Rather, it is a well-established model of consensus born by a combination of many factors: U.S.

government support for the film industry abroad (Lee, 2008), the experience of “witch hunt” in Hollywood during the McCarthy period (Shaw, 2007), and the system of personal and personnel ties between the government and the film industry (the Motion Picture Association (MPA), the industry’s lobbyist in Washington DC, is composed of a large number of former high-ranking civil servants and diplomats (Lee, 2008)).

The special status of the film industry among other U.S. public diplomacy forms and tools is one of the reasons why the cultural and entertainment dimension of public diplomacy was not affected by the systemic crisis. The decline was a direct consequence of the U.S. top political leadership’s dwindling interest in public diplomacy as a relevant foreign policy instrument and, consequently, the lack of further political will to reform, modernize and optimize the respective system of institutions, programs, and initiatives.

Since filmmaking is an independent commercial industry, these problems and the reduced funding (which has an impact, for example, on the respective divisions of the Department of State) could not affect it. At the same time, Hollywood’s contribution to public diplomacy has always been a result of semi-formal arrangements and tacit understanding between film studios and the government. Accordingly, this practice has been less affected by the consistent loss by public diplomacy of its priority status in the U.S. government’s strategic vision.

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the U.S. film industry saw an unprecedented trend towards consolidation of production and financial capacities of the entertainment industry, which brought about numerous mergers and acquisitions of companies, including film studios. Various elements of the media and entertainment industries were pooled under one umbrella: film production, television and radio broadcasting, newspaper and magazine publishing houses and editorial offices, theme parks, entertainment-related product manufacturers, and Internet service providers—all of these elements complemented and reinforced each other (Sklar and Cook, 2021).

The remaining five major Hollywood film studios—The Walt Disney Company, Sony Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Universal Studio,

and Warner Bros., all members of the Motion Picture Association—in the new conditions accumulated big enough resources to indisputably dominate the market, largely thanks to access to the latest and most expensive technologies needed both for film production and distribution (Pells, 2012; Edgley, 2016).

Another significant trend of recent decades was the actual reorientation of U.S. cinema towards the international market as the main source of income. Hence a noticeable genre imbalance in favor of blockbusters (the producers’ intentional move), which cannot be made without expensive high technologies and which enjoy the greatest success with the global audience (The Economist, 2011). The latter, in turn, is gradually drifting towards more homogeneous preferences on the film market, which American films suit best (Fu and Govindaraju, 2010). Therefore, the American film industry has firmly dominated the global blockbuster market (Zemaityte, Coate, and Verhoeven, 2018). Also, thanks to the latest technologies, streaming services are gaining ever greater popularity in the modern world, the most successful of which are also American ones, for example, Netflix (also a member of the Motion Picture Association of America) (Paksiutov, 2021); and the content they render is also predominantly “made in the U.S.” (Moore, 2020).

BLOCKBUSTERS

American blockbusters, which have gained global popularity, are successfully used as a channel for conveying narratives consonant with U.S. public diplomacy and national interests on a worldwide scale. Their entertaining function and fictional plots are certainly an advantage that contributes to American cultural hegemony. Unlike films dedicated to historical events or real military conflicts, feature films, such as science fiction and action films, that are not based on real events or have purely fictional elements in their plots, are not perceived critically by the public at large: viewers are unlikely to suspect that their minds are being tailored while they watch blockbusters. This makes “popcorn diplomacy”—a branch of public diplomacy focused on blockbusters—one of the most promising formats for making certain

messages reach a wide audience, especially given the trends in the democratization of foreign policy and diplomacy.

This article analyzes American films that are part of the most popular franchises: the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, the James Bond saga (the latest reboot series of 2006-2021), and *Mission Impossible*, as well as the *Transformers* film franchise.

Firstly, they are extremely popular worldwide: according to The Numbers website (part of the consulting analytical company Nash Information Services), which algorithmically monitors nonstop the quantitative indicators of the global film industry, Marvel Cinematic Universe is the highest-grossing film franchise in terms of global box office receipts; James Bond is the fifth highest-grossing film series. The DC Extended Universe film franchise is eleventh in the corresponding rankings, the *Transformers* film series is ranked thirteenth, and the *Mission Impossible* franchise is sixteenth (The Numbers, 2022). Secondly, in 2007-2021 (except for 2010 and 2020), at least one film from the respective franchises was among the top ten highest-grossing films in Russia (Bulletin, 2022).

Films about James Bond are worthy of separate mention. Although they are produced by the British company EON Productions, it is owned by the American holding Danjaq LLC, founded by the producer of most films made since 1962—Albert R. Broccoli who sought to make the screen image of the famous spy “more mid-Atlantic and less overtly British” (Funnell, 2011). Up until 1975, Broccoli had produced films with Harry Saltzman, another American producer who originally owned the film rights to British spy novels. From 1975 to 1984, Albert Broccoli produced films on his own; from 1984 to 1989, he did it with his stepson, Michael G. Wilson; and since 1990, all films have been jointly produced by Michael Wilson and his sister Barbara Broccoli. This enables us to postulate that, in terms of production, the Bond saga bears an unmistakably American flavor. This article considers only the latest Bond films released from 2006 to 2021.

Sarah Kelly of the University of Bristol hypothesizes in her study that the series was deliberately filmed in such a way as to minimize the British origin of the main character. The War on Terror and the

creation of the Anglo-American coalition to invade Iraq in 2003 required the emergence of a more universal hero who would embody all the values of the collective West (Kelley, 2017). Therefore, the new Bond visually and behaviorally differs little from the typical protagonist of U.S. action films: there is very little left of the British prim perfection the main character was traditionally associated with. A lecturer at the University of Rostock (Germany), Georgia Christinidis (2011), notes that with the release of the second film *Quantum of Solace*, Bond's gradual transformation into an international hero was completed. Professor Lisa Funnell of the University of Oklahoma, an expert on the study of gender and geopolitics in the James Bond films, says: “More strongly aligned with contemporary Hollywood action heroes, Craig's Bond is presented as an American action hero who speaks with a British accent” (Funnell, 2011).

Another reason for choosing most of the film franchises mentioned in this article that deserves special mention is the confirmed participation of American government agencies in the process of creating some of these films. In particular, the following projects received the Pentagon's support: *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2* (Alford and Secker, 2017), *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Captain Marvel*, *Man of Steel* from the DC Universe (Jenkins and Secker, 2022); as well as the first three films from the *Transformers* film franchise (Alford, 2010; Spy Culture, 2016). NASA, in turn, cooperated with the makers of *Thor*, *Ant-Man*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*; *Justice League*, and *Aquaman* (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). Considering indirect evidence, such as the CIA's active media support for the movie *Black Panther* (Marvel) (comparable in scale with the support for films made officially with the participation of the intelligence service) and the rather flattering portrayal of the agency's officers in the plot, experts suggest that the CIA was somehow involved in the filmmaking process (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). Also, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was evidently engaged in the production of the *Mission: Impossible* film series: before filming *Mission: Impossible III*, Tom Cruise had met with the agency's officials to discuss how to present the agency in the film in the best possible way (Jenkins and Alford, 2012).

NARRATIVES

All films promote *the idea of protecting the status quo—the rules-based world order*. The threat to the world order in the plot is metaphorically transformed into a threat to the world: in the Marvel and DC universes, as well as in the *Transformers*, the greatest threat to the world comes from outer space and/or from another world. The aliens are an allusion to representatives of a different culture, mentality and values, and therefore are dangerous and threatening (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). They are always ambitious, pursue their own benefits, and seek to overthrow the habitual life of earthmen, which ultimately should lead to disaster.

Spy villains express this narrative even more bluntly: they openly declare that their aim is not to destroy the world, but to change it. The main antagonist in *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation* is a powerful terrorist organization known as the Syndicate, which hatches plans for a new world order. In *Mission: Impossible—Fallout* it is replaced by the Apostles group, and in *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*, by a nuclear scientist, confident that nuclear war is necessary for transition to a new stage in the development of humanity. Similarly, in the James Bond films with Daniel Craig, there appear the international criminal group Specter and the world-class poisoner Lyutsifer Safin, both ambitiously striving for world domination and the establishment of a new order.

The United States' posture of the global leader is reflected in another common plot narrative: *the “immunity” of the main characters*. At a certain point in these films the audience hears criticism addressed to the protagonists (superheroes, Ethan Hunt, James Bond): the idea is voiced that they are relics of the past (an echo of the criticism of NATO, following the end of the Cold War) and are too accustomed to permissiveness, never bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions (collateral damage) and in making decisions are guided by their subjective vision, not by the powers delegated by an official authority (a hint at U.S. and NATO military operations without a UN mandate).

However, both *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, as well as *007: Specter* and *Mission:*

Impossible—Rogue Nation clearly show how bad is the idea to try to squeeze the “good guys” into the generally accepted framework: they should have a free hand, because only they, and not international organizations/governments (an allusion to U.S. relations with international institutions and other states in the real world) know how to act and when. They are not perfect, but without them it would be even worse, so they should not bear any responsibility. Moreover, in three of the four films named, the idea of limiting the protagonists and calling into question their infallibility and importance for the world was planted in the public mind and respective organizations by criminal groups in pursuit of their selfish aims.

This latent message hints that there are no alternatives to U.S. leadership in the international arena and warns against trusting revisionist powers. U.S. readiness to remain a leader at all costs for the common good is well voiced by Optimus Prime, one of the main characters in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*—an alien combat robot who takes the people’s side to fight shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. army: “In any war, there are calms between the storms. There will be days when we lose faith, days when our allies turn against us. But the day will never come that we forsake this planet and its people.”

Another narrative that indirectly enhances the dominance of the American paradigm of perceiving the world order is the idea of *American exceptionalism*. As Victoria Zhuravleva notes, messianic rhetoric has always been an integral part of U.S. foreign policy concepts, while the end of the Cold War created an extremely favorable situation for implementing relevant ideas (Zhuravleva, 2014). Since the undisputed global leadership of the United States in the international arena is an integral part of the “rules-based order” paradigm, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism is reflected in popular films more often than not.

Naturally, in blockbusters this narrative is veiled to varying degrees. But even a quick look is enough to see that in the superhero films of the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, as well as in the *Transformers* film series, the alien invasion—the imaginary embodiment of the threat to the whole world unparalleled in this history of the human race—

usually takes place on the territory of the United States (Novak, 2021). The message of such clichéd plots is this: should America fall, the rest of the world will have nothing to hope for.

In the films of the *Mission Impossible* franchise, the savior of the world from heinous plans to destroy the world order is Ethan Hunt, who is not just an American by nationality, but an intelligence officer working for the U.S. government. The same goes for most of the superhero protagonists from the already mentioned movie franchises: they can have members of different nationalities or ethnicities on their team, but the leader is always either an American or a character who is associated with America (Steve Rogers in *Captain America*, Tony Stark in *Iron Man*, Clark Kent in *Superman*, etc.).

However, of still greater interest is the following fact. The very image of the main character in superhero films or action films like *Mission: Impossible* or the James Bond saga is the image of a superhuman (regardless of whether his extraordinary abilities are completely supernatural or more realistic). The Superhuman is a hero of most modern blockbusters, in other words a “Messiah”: there is nobody else like him, he is exceptional, and only he can protect the whole world. By virtue of his special status, the “Messiah” defies the rules, while the plot is structured in such a way that the audience supports rather than condemns his behavior (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). The Superhuman in most cases not only does not hesitate to use force; moreover, violence is his main tool (be it extraordinary physical abilities, high-tech weapons, or exceptional shooting skills). Again, in an average blockbuster plot, such violence is presented in a way that does not arouse the viewer’s revulsion (the lack of overly naturalistic details, which Roger Stahl, Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Georgia, calls the “clean war” concept (Stahl, 2009)), or condemnation (the moral correctness of the hero is not questioned, since the salvation of humanity is on the other side of the scale).

It is quite remarkable that in its modern adaptations of superhero comics the American film industry is gradually drifting away from the classic rule established in the 20th century, when the corresponding genre was largely focused on molding the younger

generation according to the formula: “Superheroes don’t kill.” For example, in his recent book *Superheroes, Movies, and the State: How the U.S. Government Shapes Cinematic Universes*, Professor Tricia Jenkins of the Texas Christian University and investigative journalist Tom Secker point out that in *Man of Steel* released in 2013 and supported by the U.S. Department of Defense, the American national hero Superman for the first time ever since his emergence as a fictional character (in 1938) commits a murder, thereby coming close, in the viewer’s perception, to the American soldier and the U.S. Army as a whole: no one would question that soldiers kill and sometimes, for the higher good, killing is necessary (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). The logic of the necessity in exceptions to the rules for maintaining the leader’s status quo fits perfectly in the U.S. post-Cold War military and foreign policy agenda: from the concept of the “responsibility to protect” and humanitarian interventions to the doctrine of unilateralism and to the War on Terror.

HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CLICHÉS

Another technology that allows American movies to act as a public diplomacy tool capable of shaping the international community’s picture of the world in conformity with the American paradigm of the world order is the inclusion of real historical events and geographical territories in the blockbuster plots about superheroes and spies.

A range of details help influence the viewers’ geopolitical image of a certain country or region through cinema: how this region is depicted in the film; what role the inhabitants of a given country or people from this region play in the plot; and what national and ethnic stereotypes are employed in the characters’ dialogues and behavior. Naturally the frequent appearance of Russian, Chinese or Arab villains on the screen does not force the international community to immediately project the corresponding image to real people or countries. However, multiple recurrence of the image of a villain with a clear set of certain characteristics and unmistakable national identity makes it easier for the human mind, if necessary, to attribute such a role to a “suitable” nation or state in real life.

The Marvel, DC and *Transformers* cinematic universes as well as films about James Bond and Ethan Hunt, demonstrate a traditionally Western-centric approach to geopolitical imagery. Latin American, Asian, African, and Middle Eastern developing countries are often depicted in the context of illegal arms trade (*Mission Impossible 3*, *Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation*, *Iron Man*), militant groups and terrorists (*Mission: Impossible—Rogue Nation*, *Casino Royale*), lack of order and law (*Doctor Strange*, *Black Panther*), corruption, suffering of the local population, dictatorial governments (*Quantum of Solace*, *Mission: Impossible—Fallout*) (Borzakian and Rouiaï, 2021).

Chinese and Eastern European cities are, as a rule, grotesquely “shabby” and unattractive (*Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Quantum of Solace*, *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*, *Black Widow*). As for Eastern Europe, especially such states as Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia, they are very often mentioned in the context of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and their illicit trafficking (*Mission: Impossible—Fallout*; *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*; *No Time to Die*), as well as in the context of the vulnerability of the local population to experiments on humans and technologies to manipulate human consciousness (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*; *Captain American: Civil War*; *Black Widow*; *Avengers: Age of Ultron*). Professor Robert Saunders of the State University of New York, a leading specialist in popular geopolitics and national branding, in his book entitled *Popular Geopolitics and National Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm*, emphasizes that Eurasia is often presented in popular culture as “a frozen, crime-ridden, gray, and/or irradiated wasteland” (Saunders, 2017).

It is noteworthy that Western Europe is represented in a no flattering way: of all the allies, Britain’s James Bond can firmly rely only on his U.S. counterparts, and Ethan Hunt, in turn, on the British ones. The American protagonists of the *Transformers* franchise finds allies in the UK (*Transformers: The Last Knight*). Europe, as represented by Italy (*Quantum of Solace*) and France (*Mission: Impossible—Fallout*), appears under-competent due to the low effectiveness of its law-enforcement forces as compared to the Anglo-Saxon protagonists (Borzakian and

Rouiaï, 2021), which, in general, illustrates the low status that these allies have in the paradigm of the American worldview from the standpoint of military and critical foreign policy issues.

The examined geopolitical images of states and regions correspond to the paradigm of the U.S.-centric world order, in which the United States is the global leader, the United Kingdom is its main ally, while Western and Central Europe plays a passive role. Other regions are often shown as sources of instability and real or potential threats, which serves as an excuse for hypothetical American interference in the internal affairs of these countries to the benefit of humanity or for the sake of preserving the existing world order. As for Asian, African, and Latin American countries, the analyzed films assert the stereotype of a chaotic and dangerous environment. In the proposed stereotypes, Eastern European states and Russia do not look like a direct threat to peace or stability, but are associated with nonconventional weapons, poisoning, human rights violations, law enforcement and intelligence officers with an explicit vein of cruelty and use of methods that go beyond the generally accepted norms. In this way, the audience is prepared for future political decisions related to possible security threats that would be consistent with the blockbuster-shaped vision of the world, which perfectly fits into the concept of securitization (Balzacq, 2005)

Manipulations with history are another specific technique found in blockbuster plots. They can take many forms. Firstly, the censoring and editing of historical facts that may show the United States and its allies in a bad light: for example, racial segregation (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*); the CIA's instigation of coups d'état in Africa during the Cold War (*Black Panther*); pursuit of real political interests by the U.S. and Britain (and not just a desire to oppose “evil”) during World War I (*Wonder Woman*) (Jenkins and Secker, 2022). Secondly, a shift of emphasis in a number of historical events: exaggeration of the role of the U.S. and Britain in the victory over Nazism in World War II (Novak, 2021) and the downgrading of the role of the USSR; an emphasis on the Soviet Union's alleged collaboration with former Nazi scientists after the war for mitigating the real facts of such collaboration

by the United States (*Captain America*; *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*; *Captain America: Civil War*; *Transformers: The Last Knight*); over-dramatization of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, such as the alleged deaths of children in a school close to the NPP. This detail is purely fictional, but in viewers' perception enhances the negative stereotypes of the Soviet Union (*Transformers 3: Dark of the Moon*).

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The popular films analyzed in this article are a clear example of how significant the contribution of American cinema to the promotion of the U.S.-centric paradigm of the world order in international public opinion is. The narratives of superhero and spy blockbusters propagate the doctrines of American exceptionalism and global leadership; the legality of extraterritorial use of force by the United States and its allies; and, in general, the use of force as an acceptable response to challenges. The effect is enhanced by the clichéd portrayal of the “other” regions of the world and/or states as poor, immersed in chaos and lawlessness, authoritarian, and unattractive. Even U.S. allies (except for Great Britain) are shown as weak and incapable of coping with challenges without the help of the hegemon. Manipulations with historical events are frequent: facts that are inconvenient for the United States and its allies are omitted in the narrative; while the hegemon's achievements stand out: the role of other participants in historical events are deliberately downplayed or presented in an exaggeratedly unattractive light.

As an instrument of U.S. public diplomacy, blockbusters have an indirect impact on international public opinion, and this effect has been accumulated for many years. As Hollywood's reorientation to export began at the end of the 20th century and so did the promotion of American blockbusters on a global scale, their narrative has already affected the worldview of an average man who regularly sees popular films. This is particularly true of Europe, where, in contrast to other regions, alternative ideas of the world order are voiced publicly far more rarely in official and expert discourse. An additional instrumental value of blockbusters featuring superheroes and spies is that they are

quite attractive to young people, who naturally lack knowledge of world history and international political situation analytics necessary for critical perception of clichés incorporated in fiction films.

From the standpoint of threats to Russia, particularly noteworthy is the fact that the same narratives deliberately cultivate associations between a large-scale threat to peace and security and the idea of a revision of the liberal world order. In this way they incite a negative reaction of the world public to any action or rhetoric that the United States would slam as a “challenge to the rules-based world order.” As an active proponent of a multipolar world paradigm, Russia finds itself by default in a disadvantageous position in the struggle for international public mind, because the latter is already under the influence of the American narrative that leaves no chance to objectively assess reality and absorb relevant arguments.

Moreover, as the experience of recent years shows, other instruments of the “fight for hearts and minds” that major powers use in a bid to prove their righteousness in the clash of the two paradigms are easily restricted, if not neutralized. People-to-people contacts—exchange programs, the export of education, and international cultural and scientific events—may be significantly limited amid pandemics, transport problems or interstate disputes, while distance communication formats are unable to yield the same effect. Foreign broadcasting, as follows from the adoption of laws restricting foreign media, both in Russia and abroad, can easily be minimized: having lost the opportunity to interact with a wide audience, the media can retain only the meager circle of recipients of their content—those who are ready and able to look for ways to bypass the blocking and take additional efforts to hear alternative points of view. In a situation like this the cultural and entertainment content—primarily movies—remains the most stable instrument of U.S. public diplomacy.

And still, in the current situation there are certain opportunities for Russia. With all the achievements and capabilities of Hollywood, U.S. public diplomacy is in crisis, and over the past thirty years the U.S. political leadership has not displayed interest in breathing a new life into the apparatus of the respective political technology. Within the

framework of U.S. strategic vision, it is not a priority at all. Moreover, the latest events indicate that the United States is beginning to feel somewhat uncertain about its positions in the information sphere. Although the narrative based on the demonization of Russia, its leadership and political decisions seemingly prevails in the Western public opinion, the active blocking of Russian media and Russia's foreign-language broadcasting channels abroad, including restrictions on the respective accounts in social media (Kommersant, 2022; Vzgl'yad, 2022), and the massive recall of Western correspondents from Russia (Bloomberg News, ABC News, CBS News, the BBC and Canadian Broadcasting Corp—all have reported temporary suspension of news gathering in Russia and reporting from Russia (Bloomberg 2022; CNN, 2022a)) indicate that, the U.S. has certain fears the situation may change if Russia has a chance to explain its vision of the situation to the foreign public through journalists.

Russia should study and partially borrow the American experience in promoting the worldview paradigm. Moreover, as experience shows, unlike other public diplomacy instruments, cinema is most resistant to economic, domestic and foreign political upheavals. It does not cause a preventive negative reaction, since it is not perceived as an instrument of promoting political narratives, and remains available even amid information blockades, at least on material media.

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