

# *Rocky IV :*

## Sylvester Stallone's Failed Attempt at Peace



Propaganda's ultimate goal is to accomplish one of two things – either maintain the status quo or effect change. But when propaganda fails to accomplish one of these outcomes, it can tend to reinforce and endorse the opposite effect it intended. The great Italian thinker and philosopher Rocky Balboa put it best when he ended the Cold War with his proclamation, “If I can change! And you can change! Then everybody can change!” (*Rocky IV*) ...but nobody really changed.

Especially, the audience.

By the end of the film *Rocky IV*, audiences have been inundated for an hour and a half with classic Cold War imagery that substantially reinforced staples of American 80's ideology so ardently, that any attempts the film makes to humanize the looming Russian state and create an understanding between cultures ultimately runs hollow.

*Rocky IV* is the fourth film in the famed boxing movie franchise as we follow Sylvester Stallone's Rocky Balboa on his quest to avenge the death of his friend Apollo Creed at the hands of a younger, larger, and stronger boxer out of the Soviet Union – Ivan Drago. Whether it's the blatant cold war plot and nationalist characters, the juxtaposition of wildly different training montages, or the dialogue that turns this simple boxing match into a fight for freedom itself, *Rocky IV* is an incredibly insightful look into American culture at this time. With the proliferation of franchises and reliability on rebooting and remaking existing popular entertainment icons and stories in the world of cinema, iconic film characters and stories aren't merely popular anymore. They're becoming symbols of modern American mythology. Symbols that stand for something and that will be passed down from generation to generation just as much as the literal history of our nation. As pointed out in Adam Boffa's piece, "No Accounting for Taste – The Right Wing Batman," he notes how a similar American cinematic icon – Batman – changes to reflect the communal American desires and fears of their times. He identifies how public fear involving nuclear weapons, immigration, and economic recession and desire for government intervention helped shape Nolan's Batman. "[Nolan's films] reflect a growing



**Figure 1**

comfort with authoritarianism in mainstream American politics" (Boffa, 1). These iconic characters bend and mold to the ideals held by the US at the time they're produced – touching on the pulse of the nation at that moment, whether consciously or unconsciously. People identify personally with these characters and what they do and stand for (Figure 1). Lots of people. These are billion-dollar properties, and franchises like the *Rocky* and *Batman* movies are also giant

advertisements for modern American culture that reach almost every corner of the world – their messages have an immense global impact about the state of the nation and our people’s beliefs.

This power of iconography combined with the current tensions between Russia and the US being at an all time high since the end of the Cold War in the 1980s, is why it’s so necessary to look back and see how *Rocky IV* further hardened the 80’s-Cold War-American mentality at the time, despite attempting to change it. This can be understood by looking at the characterizations of America and Russia in the two lead characters, the extreme nationalist and fascist themes in the film and the way these are both materialized.

America loves to identify with an unexpected hero. Rocky is an underdog – an ideal so American that it is woven into the very story of how our country was founded. He represents something that every American sees themselves at some point in their life. In the 70’s he represented much-needed escapist, warm-hearted, come-from-behind idealism (*Rocky I, Rocky II*). In the 80’s he was fighting cultural stereotypes that people believed were against the 80’s American Identity – an angry African-American criminal (*Rocky III*), and an unfeeling Russian monster (*Rocky IV*). And now into the 2010’s, he has been replaced with a character in Michael B. Jordan’s Creed that is a reinvention of what America now identifies with – a young African-American man looking to prove who he can be (*Creed, Creed II*). But in *Rocky IV*, it’s the only film in the series where these themes are presented consciously and extremely purposefully manifesting into the most political and propaganda-affective film in the franchise. This is because instead of there being an undercurrent of ideals and American beliefs that we as an audience can extrapolate from the film, the beliefs are now plastered on top of the film for every audience member to see in **BOLD ALL CAPS FONT WRITTEN IN RED WHITE AND BLUE**. It’s a transition from the implicit to the explicit, from a sociological to the political.

Jacques Ellul identifies clearly in *Propaganda – The Formation of Men's Attitudes* that “[political propaganda] involves techniques of influence...with a view to changing the behavior of the public” (Ellul 62). Change is a huge theme in the film uttered by multiple characters in multiple speeches, culminating with the famous speech about change, mentioned at the beginning, that Rocky gives to the cheering Russian fans after beating their champion. Stallone wants the film to be a movie about understanding your enemies, being open to changing yourself in order to change others and finding common ground with people you disagree with. Too bad the film makes little to no effort to do so. One of the biggest faults of which being that Drago – the face of Russia in the movie – has literally 9 lines of dialogue in the film consisting of such complex, relatable, human lines as “I must break you,” “I defeat all men” and “If he dies, he dies” (*Rocky IV*). The Russians are not given enough reason to side with or understand because they are embodied in the being of a robotic giant who kills and also apparently doesn't feel bad about killing. And one who is also unable to communicate how he feels about all that because he has no lines. Of course, you can tell a story and a person's feelings without dialogue, but Stallone's direction of Drago is to be nearly inhuman with how little he feels so he comes across in his silent moments as just uncaring. Seeing ourselves through Rocky, our stereotypes of Russians as unfeeling, cruel, and frighteningly powerful are all heightened.

Artistic choices like this and others are signifiers of how the movie tends to be more effective as social propaganda about the state of the US's perspective on US and Russian relations during the mid-80's, rather than as political propaganda meant to objectively and fairly deal with the relations between the two countries and change your mind about them. The choices the movie makes inadvertently say more about our nation at this time than intended. Jacques Ellul points this out in an example of social propaganda:

“When an American producer makes a film, he has certain definite ideas he wants to express, which are not intended to be propaganda. Rather, the propaganda element is in the American way of life with which he is permeated and which he expresses in his film without realizing it.” (Ellul 64)

Stallone doesn't intend for his film to be about the hyper-masculine nationalist fear of an unstoppable Russian monster – but that's what it becomes because of the way he chose to tell the story. Change is one of the central themes of this film. Rocky asks Apollo not to fight, Apollo tells Rocky they can't change who they are and that he has to fight. Rocky eventually agrees when he chooses to avenge his death and fight Drago reciting some of the same things Apollo told him, saying “I'm a fighter. That's the way I'm made... We can't change what we are. You can't change anything. All we can do is just go with what we are” (*Rocky IV*). And then he does the fight. Wins. And the Russians cheer for him, inexplicably, and the movie ends with Rocky's big speech about how he's changed and how he thinks the world can change for the better. But Rocky doesn't change at all. And neither really does Drago. Rocky simply gets madder and



Figure 2

trains harder and beats yet another foe he didn't think he could beat – by going through with the fight he proves the idea mentioned earlier by Apollo that you can't change who you are. He's still a fighter. Drago's big change is that he loses. This lack of meaningful change in either side just furthers the present divide between the two nations opinions of one another. Opinions fraught with misunderstanding and riddled with judgement based on base stereotypes. Rocky is shown living in a mansion with his family and a robot butler, and Apollo playing in his huge pool with his three golden retrievers (Figure 2); that is then juxtaposed with where Rocky trains – Drago's Home – Russia. Represented here by a desolate farming village in the icy,

barren tundra with lower-class citizens looking on our hero (Figure 3). It unintentionally reflects a sense of righteous capitalism in the face of a poorer, colder communism. Therefore, strengthening the stereotypes of our two leads and their national identities.

This is also a fully Americanized production. As Ellul points out and as seen in this film – that directly affects the film you make. There are zero Russian-born actors, producers, writers, and consultants on staff; The portions of the film shot in Russia are actually Wyoming and Vancouver, and all the Russian extras in the stadium at the end are Canadians, and all the Russian actors are all US citizens or European non-Russian actors. Imagine telling a story so involved in the identity of a country and having no one actually from that country involved in any part of your filmmaking process. You get one-side of the argument. Thus, one perspective and point of view: Rocky's. Or should I say: Stallone's. OR should I say: America's. You can see this exemplified in an L.A. Times interview with 11-year-old Soviet child ambassador, Katerina Lycheva. She was a good will stunt by the Soviet Union as a young girl who toured America preaching nuclear disarmament – she saw the film during her tour. “‘It hurt me to see that the Soviet Union and the Soviet people could be shown in that way. . . . It frightened me and upset me...’ she said, adding that she cried afterward” (Lycheva 1). Here you see the negative effects of when a story is told by people outside the culture it is concerning itself with. Imagine seeing a Black Panther movie where all the writers, directors, costumers, production designers, and even actors were not of African descent? That's why Stallone's message of change can't reach a Russian audience member like





he hoped it would. They are being bogged down with rude stereotypes and a misunderstanding of their culture in the representation of Drago and his home, and people cannot identify with a character in Rocky who has not learned anything about making peace.

Fascism and Nationalism plague both sides of the conflict, highlighting the extreme nature of the opposing forces, so much so, that there is little room for sympathy on either side. We can see this in the mere production design of the film. According to production designer Bill Kenney, there was no visual or editorial material from which to reference for the design of the Russian sets, so he crafted things like the totalitarian Russian stadium and futuristic training laboratory almost completely from his imagination (TotalRocky.com). When I first saw the gigantic red flags, the portraits of Marx and Lenin hanging from the rafters, the giant hammer and sickle insignia everywhere, and the manically hostile crowd, the first thing my mind went to was the scene in the third Indiana Jones movie where Indiana infiltrates a book burning held by a large crowd of Nazi soldiers (Figure 4). The multitude of soldiers, the red flags, the central spectacle the people have feverishly gathered for. This evocative imagery feels very Orwellian

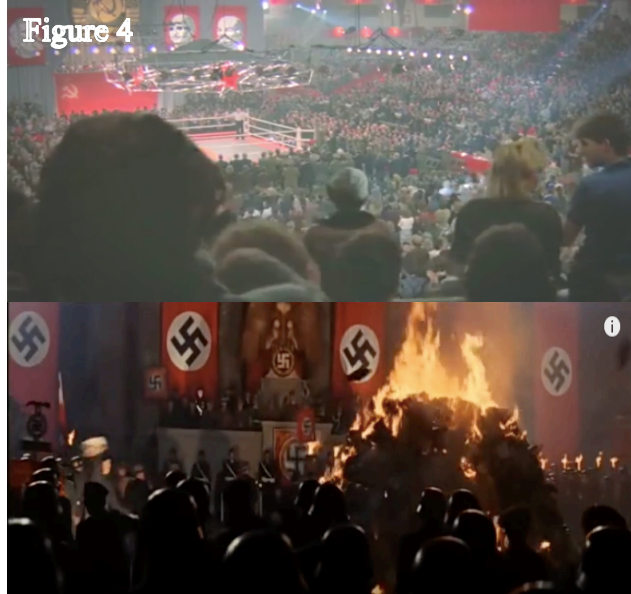


Figure 4



Figure 5

and that of an evil lair for a hero to walk into. There's a 1985 teaser that highlights some of the ways they went about instilling this fascist image. Take this still from a teaser (Figure 5). In almost too-on-the-nose



fashion, it reminds viewers of fascist Nazi propaganda during the second world war, as seen in the piece “Der Deutsche Student,” a propaganda poster about “German students fighting for the Fuhrer and his people” (AllThatInteresting.com,

Figure 6). Drago’s is one that takes that message to mean *literal* fighting for Soviet pride. His is of course given the cinematic treatment of being held in threatening silhouetted lighting so as to further allude to his presence as the villain of the film, but the proud blonde, healthy, Aryan white man against a flagged backdrop absolutely stirs the feelings of fascist takeover that were ingrained in Nazi Propaganda. There are allusions to eugenics and the perfect race of man that Drago signifies, with Drago’s coach remarking how he is a better fighter genetically, chemically, and that his inevitable dominance “is a matter of size and evolution” (*Rocky IV*). These are all emblematic traits of not only fascism, but specifically Nazi fascism. It’s hard for Stallone to start an honest conversation with the opposite side of this international conflict, when you are constantly being flashed images that makes you feel like the opposite side of the conversation are simply Nazi’s.

But it’s not just the Russians who are shined in this light, the American perspective of Russia in the film is perfectly defined by Umberto Eco in his piece *Ur-Fascism* when looking at the way the American viewpoint is characterized in the film.

“The followers must feel humiliated by the ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies...However, the followers must be convinced that they can overwhelm the enemies. Thus, by a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak. Fascist governments are condemned to lose wars because they are constitutionally incapable of objectively evaluating the force of the enemy” (Eco 7).



Americans in the movie both see Russia as strong yet weak enough to overcome. You are presented with people constantly telling Rocky how strong Drago is, but then you have characters like Paulie, Rocky's buddy, uttering lines at the Russians like "we don't keep our people behind a wall with machine guns" seeing the union of Russia as weak and unlivable. We



see this dichotomy of threat in Russia's technology. Rocky trains in the winter wasteland that is apparently Russia with no TV's, little cars, and people wearing grey and tattered clothes. But Rocky is training in these

conditions in the very same montage as Drago who's training in a high-tech, state of the art, Russian athletic and doping facility (Figure 7). He's hooked up to wires and machines; he's shown on thermal computer monitors and working out in futuristic contraptions. This simultaneous opinion of Russia both being a country of powerful technology yet one of a desperate public spirit is perfectly in line with the type of fascism Umberto discusses. The Americans see that Rocky has never fought someone so large and powerful and advanced, but they know that he doesn't have the heart or spirit like Rocky does and so he will win in the end. And in a fascist regime you do not sympathize with your enemy – so any opportunity to understand Russia is thrown out in service of the American public's fascist views of Russia.

Apollo and Rocky serve as two parts of the American phoenix for their fascist supporters identify their nation with. Apollo was the once great fighter, who has now fallen. Rocky is the rebirth – he must try to regain that American confidence and pride Apollo used to instill in the American people and rise from the ashes of a fallen warrior and become a victorious one. The decision to cast a 6'5 / 250 lb. behemoth of a man vs. the 5'10 / 173 lb. Stallone hits home even

more that underdog, rising to the occasion, David vs. Goliath iconography that fascist governments align with (Figure 8).



But both sides though are immensely immersed in the idea that “there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle... life is permanent warfare.” (Eco 6-7). It feels like half of the shots in the film are of either one of these boxers working out in pain or fighting in pain. There’s also a motif between Rocky and his trainer (Apollo’s former trainer) where they yell “No pain!” at one another while working out and fighting. Duke even gives a speech where he talks about the intensity through which he must go through to win. “You’ll have to go through



hell, worse than any nightmare you ever dreamed. But in the end, I know you’ll be the one standing” (*Rocky IV*). This constant idea of suffering through pain is a theme the Rocky franchise has always held its head on,



the idea of getting hit and moving forward. And you see this in Drago in every time he trains – he’s constantly grunting, looking like he’s giving all of himself to the sport and the training, looking like he will almost cry with the amount of effort he puts in and

struggle he endures (Figure 8). They harm themselves for the sake of dominance of their enemy, much like a fascist regime. Instead of having any exchanges of beliefs or comprehension of the perspective of one another, they torture themselves to destroy one another.

The soundtrack basically spells this out in the pump-up montage song “Burning Heart,” written and performed for the film by the band Survivor:

“In the warriors code there's no surrender  
Though his body says stop his spirit cries - never!  
Deep in our soul a quiet ember knows it's you against you  
It's the paradox that drives us on  
It's a battle of wills  
In the heat of attack it's the passion that kills  
The victory is yours alone”

The lyrics talk about how you can never stop, that it's a battle of will, that your victory is rightfully yours as long as you continue to struggle to attain it. The style of the soundtrack with many hard hitting 80's rock anthems furthers this sense of loud conviction and inability to fold or back down or listen. These are fight songs – much like those of an army during wartime – of usurping your individual identity with that of a soldier's. This music gives the film the tonality of an express train chugging to the end goal of the movie – Drago's bloody defeat – with no time to stop for interjection or nuance regarding the meaning behind these men's actions and feelings.

One way the film dilutes tangible discussion and rational thinking regarding the conflict between the two characters and thus, the two nations, is by over employing the use of montages. *Rocky* films are of course known for always having a montage, but never before like this. 32% of the film is montage (McCutchen 1). Montages are meant to blur together images and sounds into a cohesive single idea. How do we show Rocky is getting stronger? BOOM. Montage of him training his butt off. How do we signify Rocky has been through a lot? BOOM. Montage of the ups and downs of the past three movies. How do we exhibit how mean Drago is? BOOM. Montage of him spitting on sparring partners, injecting steroids, killing Apollo, and staring menacingly. The characters are treated like fascist regimes, unconcerned with going into the complexities of what makes them who they are – it's concerned with pure passion and dependent on feeling. They aren't characters rather giant swaths of single emotions. Revenge for Rocky. Lust for dominance in Drago. “Pathos, the appeal to the audience's emotions,” is all the film is

concerned with. Ethos and Logos are thrown out in service of these emotion generators that the montages attempt to be (Klapper 1). Klapper defines these elements in his “Elements of Classical Argument,” and also notes how pathos is the hardest to pull off effectively. This film misses that mark by just the sheer amount of these montages overdoing the same images of working out, fighting, and angry yelling to the point where we don’t know anything other than that both these guys are pissed. It makes the conversation that Stallone hopes to stir impossible to happen, because no one is making any sense – they’re just having intense emotions. We do not get a chance to find out what either really is going through or believes – the film deprives us of information and instead hits over the head with the same feelings of anger and struggle. So, we give up and end up rooting for the guy whose friend died and outright hating the other dude. This confusion of information and intense focusing on passion is what makes fascist organizations thrive, and what destroys mutual understanding.

Sylvester Stallone is trying to do some good here. He’s trying to bring two opposed nations together on a big, popular stage where they can hopefully, at the end, gain some understanding of one another with the goal of finding eventual peace. He started with an idea that was interesting and could’ve been politically propagandistic in opening up people’s minds to one another. But with the idea not fully fleshed out, letting the characters devolve into single emotion-feeling stereotypes, we lose the idea. And what the idea was meant to do. George Orwell describes this phenomenon in *Politics and the English Language*, when he discusses the decline of language.

“It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary

trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration” (Orwell 1).

It's easy to fall into the trap when given the idea for *Rocky IV* that Drago should be an outright evil villain, fighting for an outright evil country, doing outright evil things and not caring. But this leads to bad writing, which then leads to a bad idea – making both countries look like hyper-nationalist versions of themselves digging deeper into the sides they've already chosen and the beliefs they already held. But as Orwell puts it, when taken the time, you can more clearly discover what you're trying to convey, and can make strides towards actual, personal change in someone. Sadly, *Rocky IV* failed to do this. Through poor characterizations of America and Russia in its two lead characters, to the extreme nationalist and fascist themes materialized in the film, this film is not able to change anyone, despite wanting to.





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