*Cinema and Soft Power: Configuring the National and Transnational in Geo-Politics*

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As the contributors to this valuable collection all attest, the concept of ‘soft power’ can be traced to the political scientist Joseph Nye, who, after an initial attempt in 1990, published *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004). Nye sought to analyse how governments were able to exert influence through attraction and enticement rather than coercion and how, increasingly, they attempted to mobilise a country’s ‘culture, political ideals and policies’ into a coherent strategy to promote a credible positive image, internationally and internally. Loosely extrapolated from Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, the instrumentalism of Nye’s approach – enshrined in its title – led inevitably to attempts at ranking, the Soft Power 30 Index being the most influential.

Popular culture is a key element in this process, but this collection focuses not on the familiar territory of Hollywood’s soft power agency but on the role cinema plays in the strategies of the countries constituting BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – a term coined in 2001 to describe a group of ‘emerging’ nations at a similar stage in their development, which have lacked extended consideration. In the one chapter that looks across the group, Stephanie Dennison analyses their efforts at working together: the annual BRICS film festival and various co-production initiatives. However, she concludes that the instabilities and cultural tensions within BRICS, the radical unevenness in the size of their film industries and China’s dominance, conspire to undermine these efforts to present a common and attractive image as a way of intervening in a global geopolitics whose financial arrangements and communication industries are dominated by America.

The other nine chapters focus on individual countries. Three concentrate on Russia. Both Stephen Norris and Robert Saunders explore attempts to construct positive cinematic images of Russia through direct state intervention. Norris examines the role played by Culture Minister Vladimir Medinskii in commissioning and funding blockbuster historical films, largely designed for domestic consumption, that are modelled on Hollywood but with Russian content, alongside films that spotlight Soviet sports celebrities. Saunders scrutinises two films in detail: *Guardians* (d. [Sarik Andreasyan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarik_Andreasyan), 2017), a superhero sf film, and *Viking* (d. Andrei Kravchuk, 2016) – also discussed by Norris – that deploys the mediaeval epic to rewrite Russian history with Vladimir the Great acting as an prototype for Vladimir Putin. Vlas Strukov examines the hugely successful pre-school computer animated cartoon series *Masha and the Bear* (2014 -), which he argues not only reworks the national image of the Russian bear image as an icon of fearsome power but, because free of direct government control, can negotiate ‘unofficial’ forms of cultural reciprocity, using new forms of media circulation to project a multinational image not a unitary national one.

Two chapter are concerned with China’s soft power strategies. Chris Homewood argues that cinema is central to China’s post-millennial ‘Going Out Policy’ and he analyses its attempts to use work with American co-productions to address problems in China’s international image and extend its international reach. Films, such as *Independence Day: Resurgence* (d. Roland Emmerich, 2016) depict a China that ‘no longer challenges global peace and security but instead helps America to preserve it’ (p. 99). However, Homewood contends that these films are flawed ideologically, reinscribing American hegemony through their residual orientalism and ultimate valorisation of US leadership. Song Hwee Lim’s study of *The Great Wall* (d. Zhang Yimou, 2016) focuses on the need to understand soft power influence not simply through the usual indices of box-office take, reviews and awards but its diffusion through ancillary promotion, discussion and positioning that is ‘intangible, unquantifiable and unverifiable’ (26) but arguably more important.

Whereas governments of China and Russia actively promote film’s soft power potential, the ruling elite in Brazil and India do not. Alessandra Meleiro demonstrates the Brazilian government’s failure to capitalise on the success of its animation industry by supporting its incursion into international markets. Rachel Dwyer argues that Narendra Modi’s promotion of an essentialist Hindu nationalism has failed to exploit the potential of Bollywood on the global stage or intervene to produce films that back the government’s ideological project. Scrutinising a very different level of filmmaking – community-led participatory video – Paul Cooke considers the ways in which some South African filmmakers attempt to build audiences in rural areas as well as providing a space for critique of the claims of post-apartheid South Africa as an inclusive Rainbow Nation.

The concluding chapter – something of an appendage – moves outside BRICS through Andrew Higson’s analysis of the UK’s government’s co-option of the ‘Bond phenomenon’ in its promotion the GREAT Britain campaign launched in 2011. Higson makes the decisive point that ‘the emergence of soft power doctrines and nation branding coincided with the establishment of neoliberal creative industries policy in the UK and elsewhere’ (p. 222). Cultural practices thus become forms of ‘industrial enterprise’ that result in highly simplified images of nations that are, however, neither uniformly successful nor unchallenged.

Higson’s incisive interrogation of the underlying ideology of soft power strategies and their simplified use of cinema is characteristic of this informative and intellectually sophisticated collection in which each contributor probes both the uses of soft power and their limitations, and includes consideration of alternative forms of production that work outside the usual circulatory modes. Inevitably a collection that deals with current geopolitics is time-bound – the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine are outside its scope – but more importantly, the authors’ critique of Nye’s binary logic and his assumption that the goal of soft power is competitive success, and their trenchant discussion of approaches and methodologies provide productive ways in which further work can be conducted.

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