



# **RUSSIA HOUSE**



S T U D Y G U I D E

# Expectations

When we go to the cinema we usually have strong expectations of the film we are about to see. Either we will have read reviews in the Press, or seen items on TV, or heard friends discussing it. Or perhaps we will know the previous work of the film's director or writer, or we know the actors and associate them with particular types of movies. If Arnold Schwarzenegger appears on the poster, we don't normally expect to see a romantic comedy!

Make a list of everything you already know about 'The Russia House' before seeing the film. Key points could include:

- 1) which actors appear in it
- 2) where the story comes from (is it based on a novel, or play, or is it original?)
- 3) what you know about John le Carré
- 4) the title: 'The Russia House'

What other images/facts/associations spring to mind? Where have these associations come from? For each of these key points, discuss in groups how they affect and add to our expectations of the film.

Some of these key points deserve discussion in greater detail. For instance think more about John le Carré. Has anyone in the group ever read one of his novels, or seen any televised versions? ('Smiley's People' or 'A Perfect Spy' for instance) What sort of stories were these? How complex were their plots and characterisation? And how does our knowledge of other stories by le Carré change our expectations of 'The Russia House'?

Next brainstorm all the words/names and images you associate with the word 'Russia'. Cover as wide a field as possible:

- famous cities and monuments
- moments from history
- food or drink associated with the country
- writers and artists
- colours
- past and present politicians
- famous people

Once the ideas have stopped flowing, reflect on the 'associations' you have made. Is it possible to succinctly sum up what you know about Russia? Do you know a lot more about some aspects of the country than others? If so, which ones, and is it possible to say how, or why, you have a clearer picture of the country's politicians than of its writers, say? Consider, too, the diversity of your associations, and whether they were broad generalisations or specific ones. Finally, how many of the ideas could be described as clichéd, and is it possible to pinpoint where those clichés come from? From films? From books? From stories or anecdotes? (It might be interesting, for comparison, to try the same exercise for other countries; for instance Spain and Canada.)

Once you have seen the film, look back at your notes. To what extent did it fulfill your expectations? If you were surprised by the film, try to focus on what it was that surprised you. Do we feel cheated by having our expectations overturned, or does an element of surprise add to our enjoyment?

## GENRE

Most films can be categorised within one particular genre. This means we can classify them under certain headings, for instance, 'romance', 'science fiction', 'thriller' and so on. What other genres can you think of?

Sometimes films fall under more than one heading. 'Always' for instance, was a romantic comedy, 'Blade Runner' a science fiction thriller. It might be thought that to cross genres is a sign of a sophisticated film, but that's not necessarily the case: 'Back To The Future III' for instance is a comedy! science fiction/Western - but is it sophisticated?

Having seen it, how would you describe 'The Russia House'? As a romance? As a thriller? (And what exactly do we mean by the word 'thriller'?) Which aspects of the film are typical of that particular genre?

The film is also about Intelligence and espionage, about the spy network that exists between the East and the West. Do you think that spy movies should be regarded as a genre in their own right? If so, what do you consider to be the key elements within a spy movie? Is it just the presence of spies? Or do we also expect certain types of locations, narrative and characterisation?

One element of 'The Russia House' that might seem surprising is the complexity that surrounds the plot. It is not an easy film to understand. We are expected to watch and listen carefully, to pick up clues so that we understand exactly what is going on.

For instance, did you fully understand why Dante's manuscript was so important? And what was the significance of 'the shopping list'? Why would it have been so valuable to the Russians?

## TASK

Try debating, as a group, the reasons why Barley betrayed the West. Did he help the KGB merely to help Katya, or was there more at stake? Try to agree on one sentence that sums up Barley's position at the end of the film. How simple is this to do?

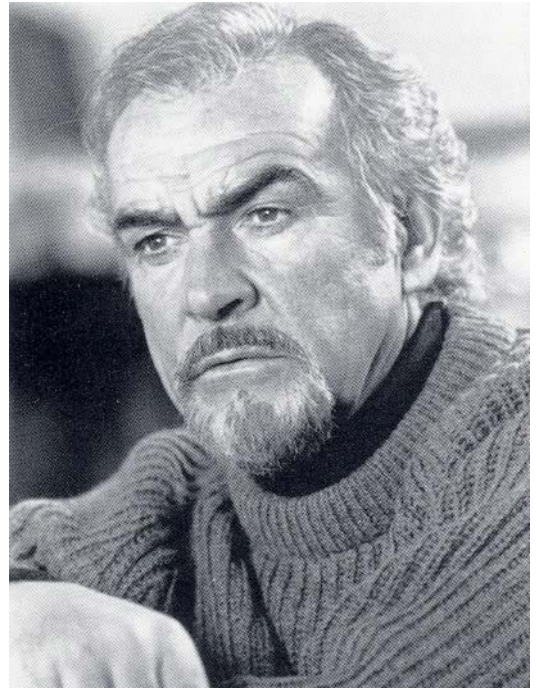
Espionage films are quite similar to detective novels, they thrive on complexity: the more tangled the plot, the more we enjoy them. Why is this? Is it because by seeming complex they seem more real? Or did you find the complicated plot a weakness, did it actually spoil your enjoyment?

## CHANGING FACE - THE SPY MOVIE

"The part (of Barley Blair) seems tailor-made for Connery, and there is something happily appropriate about the fact that after years as James Bond, he is now tackling the demanding role of a character who abjures spying in favour of being a 'decent human being'." Press release: 'The Russia House'

Since the first appearance of James Bond in 'Dr No' (1962) secret agent 007 has been one of the most successful characters in the history of cinema, appearing in (16) films and played by five actors, of whom Sean Connery was the first, and some would say, the best.

The success of the films has largely depended on formulaic writing; elements which have broken through almost every language and cultural barrier. We watch every Bond movie knowing that Bond will win, and that along the way we will be entertained by the stunt sequences, the gadgets and the exotic locations. While the heart of the Bond films has rarely strayed from this path, the movies have nonetheless 'grown up', adapting to a changing world where politics as well as modern technology must move on.



One of the key changes has concerned the identity of each film's villain who, although usually foreign, has not always been Russian. In fact, the course of the James Bond movies seems to mirror the course of Cold War movies. What started as typical anti-Soviet films (for instance, 'From Russia With Love', 1963) matured surprisingly early, in the late 1970's. In 'The Spy Who Loved Me' (1977) Bond works alongside a Russian agent (played by Barbara Bach) to stop a common enemy who plots the destruction of both the USSR and the West. International terrorism and gangsters have for the last 10 years rivalled the more traditional anti-communist stance.

It goes without saying that all these films need an enemy of some kind. There is no point having a 'goodie' without a 'baddie' to create some form of conflict within the plot. The reason so few traditional spy movies are being made these days is simply that glasnost has removed the sense of conflict that is vital in a formulaic film.

### TASK

If you were the producer of the next James Bond movie, what sort of villain would you create for Bond to do battle with?

# CINEMA AND THE COLD WAR

"Glasnost is making a mess of Cold War movies. It's hard to hate the enemy anymore"  
The Scotsman (21/4/90)

'The Cold War' is the term used to describe the tension that existed until recently between the USSR and the USA. Whilst the Cold War has never actually broken out into armed conflict, each side has used the other as a 'bogeyman'. In the eyes of the Americans, the Russians have commonly been seen as the 'Reds under the bed', while the Americans have epitomised the 'capitalist threat' in the eyes of the Russians. As well as this, each side has used the other's stockpile of weapons as a reason to increase their own. The result was a stalemate, until the 1980's when the collapse of the Soviet economy resulted first in a decline of their military capabilities and secondly, in a slow and painful process of democratisation. This process has been far from complete, as recent events in Lithuania show, but one side effect of all this has been a decline in the tension between East and West.

Cinema played a part in the Cold War right from the start. From the late 1940's, Russians began to replace Germans as cinema villains. Indeed, by 1947, several Hollywood moguls were attacked for seeming to support Russia in their films.

Joe McCarthy, a US Senator, led a group of fanatical anti-communists in a crusade to eliminate all sign of 'un-American' activity in Hollywood and beyond. This crusade continued until the mid 1950's. By then, few film makers would have dared show the Russians in a sympathetic way. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, the dictator Joseph Stalin ensured that Americans were presented as evil villains in Russian-produced films.

Cinema has always played a vital role in the propaganda war.

The list which follows shows the key events of the Cold War from the American point of view. Some significant Hollywood movies are listed in **RED**. Each of the films listed reflects the political situation and the concerns of the public at the time.

1943 The USSR and USA fight together against Germany

**1943 'Mission To Moscow'**

**1944 'Song Of Russia' Both Hollywood movies show the USSR in a highly sympathetic way.**

1945 The Second World War Ends. The USA uses nuclear force against Japan proving its military strength. The USSR begins its domination of Eastern Europe.

1946 Churchill warns of an 'Iron Curtain' dividing East and West.

1947 In America, McCarthy crusades against communism.

- 1949 The Soviets explode their first atomic bomb: the arms race has begun.
- 1949 Hollywood responds to the Cold War: 'The Red Menace' for instance, tells the story of a US war veteran preyed on by communists.
- 1950 'Jet Pilot' starring John Wayne, showing the need for America to build up its military strength to keep ahead of the USSR.
- 1956 Hungary rises against Russian domination, hoping for American support. America fails to respond and the rebellion is crushed.
- 1956 'The Invasion Of The Body Snatchers', a sci-fi fantasy in which a small town in America is taken over by aliens: the film is a metaphor warning against the danger of 'Reds Under The Bed'.
- 1961 The Berlin wall is built, turning Berlin into two cities, and dividing East and West.
- 1962 The Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet leader Krushchev attempts to use Cuba as a missile base. Kennedy, the US President, threatens a nuclear confrontation and Krushchev withdraws.
- 1963 'Dr Strangelove' (or 'How I Learned To Love The Bomb') starring Peter Sellers: a black comedy about nuclear war, reflecting the fears felt by many Americans in the early 1960's.
- 1964 The reactionary Brezhnev takes over as Soviet leader. A long period of stagnation and repression begins in the USSR.
- 1968 Moves towards democracy in Czechoslovakia are suppressed by the Soviet Army.
- 1968 'Ice Station Zebra'. Russian and American submarines race to the North Pole to recover vital military information.
- 1973-6 Solzhenitsyn writes 'A Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich', describing life in a Soviet prison camp and confirming America's worst fears.
- 1979 The Soviet Union invades Afghanistan.
- 1979 'Moonraker', a typical James Bond film in which the villain, Drax, works with the Russians by threatening London with a nuclear missile.
- 1981 'Reds', a film documenting sympathetically the Russian revolution of 1917 (the revolution which started the communist regime). A box office failure.
- 1982 Brezhnev dies, but his successors (Andropov and Chernenko) continue the hard-line approach.
- 1983 'War Games', a classic Cold War movie in which a teenager almost starts World War 3 by tapping into the Pentagon computers.

1984 'Red Dawn'. A simplistic movie about a Russian invasion of Colorado.

1985 Gorbachev becomes Soviet leader

1985 'Rocky IV', in which Sylvester Stallone takes on a Russian boxer who has been manipulated by the Russian politburo to prove the moral superiority of totalitarian 'scientific' methods. Rocky wins.

1986 Sakharov, the Soviet dissident, is released from his prison camp.

1987 Gorbachev launches 'Glasnost', his policy of openness.

1989 Gorbachev cuts the Soviet army by 10%. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is completed. In Eastern Europe, Soviet control is drastically lessened by democratic uprisings. The Berlin wall falls.

1990 'The Hunt For Red October', Hollywood catches up with glasnost. A Cold War story about a defecting Soviet submarine. But the distributors take care to sell it as a historical movie, set "shortly before Gorbachev came to power". The Cold War, according to Hollywood is over.

## ESCAPIST FILMS

Hollywood is often accused of presenting a world which is far removed from the one in which most of us live - a sort of 'dream world' where everything works out alright in the end. In the 1930's, when Hollywood was seen as the epitome of all things glamorous, film producers used escapism (placing their stars in exotic locations, casting them as impossibly romantic millionaires and so on) so that audiences could spend a few hours immune from the harsh realities of the Depression. While the political and economic climate might have changed since then, this escapist role has remained central to Hollywood.

Most espionage films are highly escapist. According to the cinema 'special agents' are glamorous men (rarely women) who thrive in adventurous and dangerous circumstances, who drive fast cars, gamble in Monte Carlo, and seduce numerous women. This image (mostly created by the James Bond films) is based purely on fantasy. In reality espionage is painstaking work where careful surveillance (not heroics) provides results.

The obvious strategy for film makers would be to ignore the reality and home in on the heroics. After all, escapism sells. Directors interested in social or political realism may battle with financiers in the film industry who know that (although film can have considerable power in making political points) there is a danger that an 'issue' can spoil the box-office potential of a film.

To what extent do you feel 'The Russia House' is escapist? Or does it have a political point to make about current practices in espionage? Is it a film that concerns itself with an 'issue'? What is important to decide is whether the background is integral or incidental to the film. Would this film have made sense if it had been made at any other time than the late 1980's? And do we respond to the characters purely on a personal level, or do they represent more: for instance is the love affair between Barley and Katya a symbol of the greater friendship between East and West?

And in a post-glasnost age, how satisfying would you find a new spy movie that still sees the Russians as 'the bad guys'? Indeed, is it possible to make a film about espionage without reflecting world events, given that the changes in East-West relations have changed the way spies work?



## MARKETING THE FILM

The job of marketing a film is rarely controlled by the people who made it. Usually, producers/directors hand over the final print, and the distribution company then runs the marketing campaign, which aims to attract an audience for the film. (Some producers, however, do retain control: David Puttnam, producer of 'Memphis Belle', stays in charge throughout marketing). Occasionally loss of control can cause problems; producers feel put out if their artistic film is sold only on the strength of its stars, or perhaps on scenes of sex or violence. Publicists would respond that producers and directors are too involved with their material; they are not the best people to dictate how it should be sold.

Successful marketing largely depends on a good understanding of the films 'target audience'. The 'target audience' is not the same as the 'general public'; in fact cinema-goers represent only a small proportion of the general public.



Successful marketing also depends on being able to reduce the 'feel' of the film into easily manageable portions. The poster, for instance, cannot be crammed full of images; the clearer the central image and the simpler the 'tag line' (catch phrase), the easier it is for the public to take in the message without having to spend time reading reviews etc. Because of this, marketing strategies tend to rely on tried and tested formulas.

In Hollywood, producers say that no one will back a film that can't be summed up in one line. 'Pretty Woman' for instance, can be summed up as: Richard Gere and Julia Roberts in modern-day Cinderella story where rich millionaire falls for prostitute. The entire concept of the film is there in a single sentence, and therefore the distribution company can be confident that the audience will understand it and that the film will do well at the box office, which it did.

Of course things are not always this simple. 'Days Of Thunder' which was released in the summer of 1990 could be summed up as: Tom Cruise as racing car driver in fast-moving adventure movie. The film was marketed along the same lines as 'Top Gun'(Tom Cruise as US Air Force pilot in fast-moving adventure movie) a strategy that had worked in the past, and one which the publicists hoped would work again. But mysteriously, the formula failed - why ? Have the audiences had enough of simplistic adventure stories? (The big successes of summer 1990 suggest they have). If so, the publicists have a much harder job on their hands.

'The Russia House' is by no means a simple clear-cut story. Because of this, it could be packaged in many ways, and the way it is sold will have to reflect different audience tastes; for instance, between audiences in Britain and in the USA.

## MARKETING THROUGH POSTERS

Look at the poster for the film 'The Russia House'. Because the design of the poster is so important, a lot of time and effort will have been spent in thinking about what should be on the poster. No images or words appear on a film poster without the publicists being sure in some way that these will help attract an audience.

The poster must give an audience a sense of what the story of a film will be about. If you look back at your predictions as to the possible story of 'The Russia House', it may well be that these are the 'sellable' areas of the film. The fact that the film stars certain people, the fact that it is based on a best selling novel, the settings of the film, the genre of the film - all of these can be looked on as selling points.

What do you notice about the way Sean Connery and Michelle Pfeiffer are presented? Does the image of the poster tell you what the film will be about? What impression does the lettering give about the



film? What other information does the poster give? What aspects of the film have been missed out of the poster? Why do you think that only one aspect of the film is being sold? Why should it be the one that has been chosen?

## TASK

If you were given the job of selling the film, what approach would you take? Which image from the film would you select for a poster if your only real concern was to fill the cinema auditoriums? After all, this is the real intention behind publicity material.

Could you - and would you wish to - distort the feel of the film? If you do not have confidence in the era of glasnost as a subject, could you find ways of packaging the film to ignore its contemporary setting? Or perhaps you will make a feature out of its complicated plot, and use this as a selling point? The hazards of selecting an image that people might take only a few seconds to walk or drive past are risky.

When you have a clear idea of how you will tackle this task, design a poster incorporating your image and including the film's title and your own tag line. Once you have finished, write a memo to the head of the distribution company justifying your choice.

## TASK

Design a poster for a Russian audience. How will you approach the task? What differences will you have to bear in mind, and what selling 'angle' will you adopt?

## MARKETING THROUGH THE PRESS

Many newspapers run features on major movies before they are released, and before the reviews appear. These features are not so concerned with the content of the film as the stars, the location reports, the 'issues' raised in the film and so on.

Often, however, the journalists will not actually have interviewed the actors, producers and directors in person. Instead they rely on the production notes carrying vital information, which is provided by the publicist. Indeed, a large proportion of the features that appear will be heavily based on the production notes.

What is contained in the production notes can therefore greatly influence the film's advance publicity. The production notes for 'The Russia House' is 26 pages long, and is full of information about the making of the film. It breaks down as follows:

5 pages of information about why the film was made, the importance of filming in the USSR and some detail about the plot.

3.5 pages of information about the production and location filming - challenges they met and anecdotes.

9.5 pages of cast and credits - a resume of their past credentials.

8 pages about the work of the film makers and screen writer

Within the notes, a surprising amount of space is given to details about filming on location in the USSR. It is obviously hoped that the journalists who receive the material will write articles about how 'The Russia House' is the first major Hollywood movie to be filmed inside the Soviet Union with full cooperation from the Soviet authorities. Also incorporated into the first half of the production notes is information that reads like a tourist guide:

"Leningrad, often called the Venice of the north, is one of Europe's most elegant cities, with its neo-classical architecture and Russian baroque influences."

"Outside the city, the unit travelled 45 miles northeast of Moscow to Zagorsk, also called the City of Churches, known for its fine treasure store of early Russian art, dating back to medieval times."

"The unit next moved to Kolomenskoye, the old country estate of the Czars which is perched on a commanding bluff above a long curve in the Moscow River."

Why do you suppose are these travel guide explanations taking up valuable space? Do they have any direct relation to the film? If not, what does this tell us about how the publicists see the film? Could it be that the publicists consider the film to be not just about glasnost, but part of glasnost? In other words, they think that the fact that an American crew was allowed to film in the USSR is proof that relations have changed between East and West. The story of Barley and Katya is pushed aside. The real love story, according to the film's publicists, is a story of co-operation between Hollywood and the Soviet authorities. Why would this angle appeal to journalists? And do you think this is a good way to sell the film?

## TASK

Another strategy used by publicists is a 'press release', which usually consists of not more than one side of condensed information about the film. As a half-way house between the poster which is eye catching and the press pack which is quite lengthy, press releases are an ideal way of communicating vital information to busy journalists.

Try writing a 200 word release that conveys as much information as possible. Beyond the word limit, you can add quotes, either from the study guide or from reviews, and you may use any number of stills. Remember who your audience is, and that they will be requiring a certain amount of facts, as well as 'inside information' about the film. Once you have finished, try designing a logo for the reverse side. Again, you may use any relevant written or visual material from the guide.