

Excerpt from: Homogenization of Russophones and Russian culture in U.S. Media: a case study

Literature Review

Ideological Criticism

Ideological criticism allows for the identification of the dominant ideology within a culture in order to critique cultural artifacts. Rooted in Marx and Gramsci's theories on ideology and philosophy, ideological criticism assumes that those in power propagate dominant, or hegemonic, cultural beliefs within a society. "Whosoever is in charge of the economy is in control of society," (Marx, 1904, p. 4). Rather than economics, in media theory, power lies with those who control narrative. Hall (1986) points out that Marx never developed a general explanation on how social ideas worked, but that the term 'ideology' has come to refer to all organized forms of social thinking, leaving room for misinterpretation. van Dijk (1998) defines ideologies as clusters of beliefs in the mind, based on the assumption that ideas and beliefs are expressions of thought. In other words, a thought leads to an idea, the idea leads to a belief, and the belief forms an ideology, all of which can be both personal and shared. Therefore, an ideology is the gestalt of shared ideas and beliefs, thus when an ideology is dominant within a culture, it is therefore the most commonly accepted idea or thought on a subject.

By controlling the narrative, the media also control the thoughts and ideas represented to viewers. According to Hall (1974), American broadcasters align themselves with political institutions in order to interpret given situations through the lens of the dominant ideology. He argues that there can only be equal or honest coverage of the news if broadcasters refer to external authority outside of the state itself. Unbiased coverage of the news is impossible because broadcasters present political opinions as fact instead of reflecting public opinion, which is not unbiased itself.

Karl Marx (1904) refers to ideology as a false consciousness, or a set of beliefs instilled in the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. Ideology is a reflection of tradition. More specifically, it is a representation of the beliefs that were established in the past and continue to be believed by the masses as accurate. False consciousness allows those in power to use tradition to justify reasserting their dominance over those whom they govern (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001). According to Marx (1904), that power should lie with the people (the proletariat), rather than the bourgeoisie, or in this instance, the power should not lie with the politicians but with the

audience. Yet, partially due to the de-regulation of media in the United States, the amount of people who control the narrative presented are far fewer than they were fifty years ago. These individuals tend to be politically inclined. Thus, Hall (1974) concedes that unbiased coverage is impossible because even free of political influence, the media can only present a story through a subjective lens (p. 20). “Power relations...are not maintained by direct threat or theft or physical coercion, but rather by kinds of talk: ideational structure and vocabularies that rationalize, justify, and ultimately reinforce economic, political, and even social inequalities,” (Sillars & Gronbeck, 2001, p. 262). Those in control of the media assert their power over the audience by reinforcing the false consciousness of stereotypes, rendering the content of the media inherently biased.

According to van Dijk (1995), news media lends itself particularly well to mind control. Specifically, viewers change their minds, seemingly of their own free will, by accepting news reports as true or journalistic opinions as legitimate. Accepting information presented in the news as truth influences the way in which viewers develop thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and ideologies about their environments. “Over time, people develop beliefs about the characteristics of the important social groups in their environments; this knowledge influences their responses toward subsequently encountered individual members of those groups. Thus, stereotypes (as one type of knowledge about the social world) develops as an individual perceives his or her environment,” (Stangor & Schaller, 1996, p. 5). Therefore, a view presented in the media can become a belief about a subject or group regardless of whether the media presentation contains bias or truth. Media owners are able to assert hegemonic rule over media consumers as a result of the U.S. media narrative being controlled by a small number of individuals over television viewers. To serve the status quo, societies use stereotypes to justify both collective action and inaction (Pettigrew, 1979). This allows media owners to maintain the false consciousness of stereotypes that were formed historically if they continue to serve their political aims and the status quo. As a result, the public consume ideology instead of seeing their ideology reflected. Media owners become opinion leaders instead of opinion reporters. The stereotypes presented in television broadcasts are consumed as part of the dominant ideology. This means that once a stereotype has taken hold within U.S. culture, such as an anti-Soviet stereotype, it remains part of the rhetoric of the dominant ideology until it is purposefully destabilized.

The analysis of stereotypes would not be complete without considering the impact of

aesthetics to the media reports. Applied media aesthetics reinforces the values presented in a media report by using light, screen space, and sound. The report itself – the sound – is an aesthetic element which cannot be analyzed without considering all of the elements of applied aesthetic theory. Herbert Zettl (2005) establishes a structure for applied media aesthetics by breaking the elements up into five distinct parts: light and color, two-dimensional space, three-dimensional space, time-motion, and sound. These aesthetic elements create what Zettl deems meta-messages, which convey the intended meaning each element communicates to the viewer. “Television and computer video are the only audiovisual media that can capture an event, clarify and intensify it, and distribute it while the event is still in the process of becoming,” (Zettl, 2005, pg. 377). By presenting a live event as it unfolds using the aesthetics of a television live event, producers draw the viewer in and offer the sense of participation. This is reinforced in live-television by the use of computer generated imagery by unifying the temporal plane to help establish continuity (Zettl, 2005).

By creating a rhetoric of non-Americans in relation to Russophones, non-Russian Russian-speakers are othered along with ethnically Russian Russophones. This rhetoric functions as a way of validating the norms of the dominant ideology. As Said (1979) asserts, the dominant ideology is used to imply that other ideologies are automatically different, and therefore irrelevant. Orientalism demonstrates how this cultural hegemony works, he argues that through the existence of an in-group, an out-group is inherently created to accommodate anyone who does not share the in-group’s ideology (p. 5). When applying his argument here, it can be asserted that anything that is not considered American, or fitting of the dominant ideology in the U.S., such as Communism or a Soviet ideology can be viewed as an out-group ideology.

Russian Stereotypes

Stereotypes are a way of organizing and generalizing information about various social or ethnic groups. Understanding how stereotypes originate and what purpose they serve in a society enables assessment of how they specifically affect modern culture. Stereotypes are distinct from prejudice and discrimination – they are not inherently a negative attitude, nor do they directly imply pejorative action toward a group (Dividio et al, 1996). Therefore, a stereotype does not have to assume negative behavior.

In his discussion of Lacanian theory, Miller (1991) establishes that language is used for denoting information. Once a word begins to represent a thought, the thought becomes encoded

based on both the meaning of the word it has been assigned and the context of the rest of the language used to discuss it. Furthermore, because it is in essence impossible to communicate without words, words must be used to define each other. To put it simply, we use words to define other words. Once words are strung together into sentences, they become contextualized based on the words surrounding them. This gives tense, emphasis, and meaning but can also lead to ambiguity and misunderstanding. “In a language... the various signs – the signifiers – take on their value in relation to one another,” (Miller 1991, p. 31). In other words, although a word – the signifier – may carry a meaning, the meaning – the signified – is still up for interpretation based on context. This can, therefore, cause ambiguity when language is exchanged. Thus, a word such as spy may signify many different visions of secret government agents. However, once the word “spy” is paired with “mafia” and “vodka”, each word lends context to the other words in the set. Given that all three words are commonly referred to when discussing Russophones in U.S. media, the set of words combined creates a context rooted in stereotypes (Lawless, 2014).

According to Stangor and Schaller (1996), stereotypes develop both on an individual and collective level. However, both aspects must be present in order for stereotypes to transcend personal opinion and become socially accepted truths. Individual beliefs primarily stem from different levels of interaction with and interpretation of social groups. On the other hand, collective belief systems are based on language, media, and social norms. There are two aspects of how language is used to inform stereotypes; language as a way of identifying and labeling group members and language as a way of grouping people together. Stangor and Schaller (1996) refer to the media as a collective repository for group stereotypes that lets viewers recognize and researchers codify representations.

A stereotype's relevance to the group it represents – the in-group – depends upon the proximity or increased contact of those assigning the stereotype traits to the in-group. Therefore, whether individually or collectively, the more frequent the rate of interaction between in-group and out-group members, the higher the chances of developing stereotypes of a given group (Stangor and Shallar, 1996). Additionally, if multiple out-groups believe aspects of a target group's stereotype to be true, the out-group's confidence in the accuracy of the stereotype increases (McAndrews et al, 2000). U.S. media provide viewers proximity to in-groups based on the rate of coverage – the more viewers hear about a group, the more the narrative takes hold. Furthermore, stereotypes may become so ubiquitous that in-group members begin to identify

with the stereotype. “If *heterostereotypes* of a group (what out-group members believe to be true) match the *autostereotype* of a group (beliefs about one's own group), the stereotype is believed more accurate,” (McAndrews et al, 2000, p. 488). For instance, if in-group members believe that a particular trait is true about their in-group, such as a propensity to drink vodka, and this trait matches what out-group members believe about the in-group, then the stereotype that all the members of the in-group drink vodka is perceived to be more accurate. The more frequently a stereotype is used in the media, the more likely an in-group will internalize and reflect the stereotype, thus locking itself into a self-perpetuating cycle.

van Dijk (1984, 1987, 1988) contends that prejudice is both obtained from and transmitted by mass media. Among others, van Dijk’s findings affirm that stereotypes are used frequently in mass media, and can be found in programming ranging from cinema to news broadcasts. In *Prejudice in Discourse*, van Dijk (1984) states that minority characters are written into stereotypical roles while news about minorities is often negative and stories involving minorities are presented as social problems. This representation of minorities especially lends itself to an increase in perceived proximity; the media try to connect viewers to their stories by presenting them using a local angle. In his research, van Dijk (2000) claims that stereotyping and racism in the media not only target minorities on a case-by-case basis, but that it is institutionalized within the process of media production. “The role of the press in the system of racism is not limited to news reports or editorials but already begins with the daily routines of news-making,” (van Dijk, 2000, p. 37). This hails back to Hall's (2006) claims that there can never be a completely unbiased report by a broadcaster.

To understand the value system of anti-Russian stereotypes, it is particularly important to keep in mind where the stereotypes originated. Anti-Russian stereotypes originated as anti-Soviet stereotypes resulting from the perceived threat to the ideologies that represent the very foundation of American life (Fyne, 1985). Communism was an attack on the foundation of capitalism and an affliction on the American dream, where anyone could become anything if they worked hard enough. The attack on Soviets was really an attack on Soviet ideologies by claiming that capitalism is better, personal property is better, and America is better. When the stereotypes transitioned from anti-Soviet to anti-Russian, the underlying hegemonic values and cultural othering of non-American ideology was maintained.

The Russian stereotypes most pervasive in U.S. media originated in films released after

1927. Although a handful of silent films touched on the subject of Russia and the Russian Empire, the introduction of sound to cinema was able to employ the most commonly used and accepted stereotype, the Russian accent. As Fyne (1985) notes, "...it was the advent of the sound period which perpetrated new and bolder anti-Russian themes because audiences would see and hear as well the diabolical nature of a hostile people" (p. 194). The distinct accent still acts as a constant reminder to American viewers that the characters are different from themselves. This pronounced difference created a stigma of native English speakers towards individuals or characters with Russian accents. Gleszek and Dovidio (2010) define 'stigma' as an attribute of a person that is deeply discrediting, which in others' minds reduces that person from whole to tainted. Furthermore, they state that individuals with non-native (not English-speaking) accents are viewed as less intelligent, less loyal, less competent, and as speaking the language poorly. In the U.S., during the Cold War, these prejudices were embedded into an accent and mirrored in the unintelligent and disloyal behavior of Soviet characters. "Film often uses language variations and accent to draw characters quickly, building on established preconceived notions associated with specific regional loyalties, ethnic, racial, or economic alliances," (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 81). According to Shaw (2010), Soviet characters were presented as "ideological, extremist, expansionist, and unnatural," (p. 244). Cold War films showed Soviet spies, double agents disloyal to their country, and single-minded agents of Communism.

Since the dawn of anti-Soviet films, Hollywood has contrasted not just the cultures but the underlying values and ideologies that the cultures are built upon. One of the most iconic films of pre-World War II is *Ninotchka* (1939), a comedy which tells the story of a Soviet woman who is forced to question and ultimately denounce Communism in order to escape it. Adler (1974) notes that the character of Ninotchka reflects a Western perception, arguing that she "is plain in dress and feature, mannish in behavior, icy cold in temperament, and interested only in preserving and furthering the revolution" (p. 250). Not only did it portray Soviets as culturally Spartan, emotionless, single-minded, and brutish, but also it was the first of many films that contrasted fundamental Soviet and American ideologies. *Ninotchka* others Russophones from the U.S. and the ending implies that one must denounce Soviet values in order to become Westernized. This separation between what is considered Soviet and what is considered American reinforced the idea that what is Soviet is bad by reinforcing the American audience's loyalty to their own country and its overall value system.

A strong anti-Communist sentiment began to grow in the United States after 1945. As a reaction to the 1947 Hollywood blacklist, and as a reaction to pressure from the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), movie studios released more than 40 anti-Soviet films between the years of 1948 and 1952 (Adler, 1974). While many of these films were produced to appease the HUAC, they also reinforced a strong anti-Soviet presence among American audiences. Unlike *Ninotchka*, which took place outside the borders of both the USSR and the United States, these films shifted the threat of Soviet villains from distant places to inside North American borders. For instance, *The Iron Curtain* (1948), a Russian spy-themed thriller based on real life events, takes place in Canada. Adler (1974) argues that the film portrays Russians as “inhuman” symbols that “cease to be people and are merely symbols of a way of life we abhor” (p. 253). By reducing Russophone characters into symbols, Hollywood created a formula for future Russian characters to be one-dimensional representations of non-western ideology. Forty years after Adler's work, Lawless (2014) analyzed the lexis of James Bond films for Russian stereotypes. She found that Russians are usually described as ruthless, psychotic, and involved in killing or betraying their countrymen. Furthermore, Lawless (2014) finds that “the menace of linguistic discrimination in differentiating ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters by their language choices is that it may evoke audience’s perceptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ types of language – in this case Russian being the ‘bad’ one,” (Lawless, 2014, p. 92). These characters embody the Soviet stereotypes established in earlier films, and continue to reinforce the idea that Soviets are 'bad,' and that Americans are 'good'. – a mentality meant to unify viewers based on their shared American values.

Russian characters in U.S. media have not changed much since the fall of the Soviet Union. Since the disbanding of the USSR, anti-Soviet stereotypes have been rebranded as anti-Russian. The over-abundance of negative Russian stereotypes in primetime drama programs such as *The Americans* (Weisberg, 2013) is being absorbed by heavy viewers and affects their political values. The primetime network drama genre is rich with Russian characters representing criminals in *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan, 2013), Russian mafia in *Sons of Anarchy* (Sutter, 2008), espionage, and sexual objectification of Russian women in *Archer* (Reed, 2010). The difference is that these stereotypes are now used to classify Czechs, Armenians, Moldavians, and Uzbeks, as well as Russians. They are all presented with the same accent, the same features, and continue to be shown as violent, brutish, emotionless, and ignorant. No matter what year or what

show, the characters maintain the established values of non-American, or bad, culture.

Russian stereotypes are generated and reinforced on an individual level by associating with Russophones and applying these experiences to the group as a whole. When applying Hall (2006) and van Dijk's (2000) arguments to the understanding of the proliferation of the media in U.S. households, it is clear that media consumers never need to have met a Russophone personally to formulate an opinion about them. Anti-Soviet stereotypes are also propagated generationally by family members. This further eliminates the need for individuals to interact with actual Russophones in order to develop stereotypes.

By presenting anti-Soviet Russian-speaking characters as the antagonists in anti-Soviet propaganda films, the media associate the negative anti-Soviet stereotypes to Russophones. Russophones then become a representation of the social and ethnic culture of Russians. Hence, viewers have been given no distinction between the ethnic groups who speak Russian. This causes viewers to group non-Russian Russophones into the same stereotype categories as Russians. As a result, U.S. media continue to systematically eliminate ethnically non-Russian Russophones by grouping them with ethnic Russians, causing a homogenization of ethnicities. Thus, not only does U.S. media propagate outdated stereotypes, it also misapplies these stereotypes to ethnic groups. This results in audiences understanding these stereotypes to be true and accurate interpretations of Russophones, thus existing within this false consciousness. As a result, the stereotypes prevalent in Cold War films, which categorize Russophones into violent, untrustworthy, unintelligent characters, became the default Russian stereotypes accepted by American audiences today.