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The Cold-War Comedy Films and the Tradition of Cross-Cultural Reconciliation in American Literature

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Interracial relationships have been a significant theme in American discourse in a variety of fields. One scholar who raised an important issue in the field of literary studies in the Cold War America was Leslie Fiedler. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler introduces the concept of the “shadow spouse,” a form of interaction between the white American man (majority) and a non-white other (minority). Through this concept, Fiedler discusses how a cross-cultural partnership is a uniquely important element in prominent works of American literature. According to Fiedler, the protagonists in American literature are “heroes in flight from woman and home,” reflecting the reader’s unconscious rebellion against society, and therefore they are the opposite of domesticity. They want a partnership with an “alien shadow figure symbolizing the instinctive life (362),” like Queequeg in *Moby Dick*. The meaning of “homosexual” relationships in American literature as discussed by Fiedler has been debated and criticized from a variety of perspectives. However, while the particularities of interracial partnerships in American literature have been discussed, the modes of reconciliation that can lead to such unique interracial solidarity have received less attention.

Fiedler argues that the tradition of protagonists who reject civilization and sexual maturity in American literature has been carried over into popular culture in the form of detective stories and westerns (347-8). American films, which have inherited these styles, have also depicted cross-cultural reconciliation in various forms. Of particular importance for the theme of reconciliation in American films are the Cold War stories of the 1960s, a period in which American public opinion rapidly shifted from the hard-line anti-communism

symbolized by the Red-Purge movement up to the 1950s to a reconciliation between East and West. Several films reflected this cultural current and attempted to portray the diplomatic accommodation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union as a story of personal reconciliation within the context of American cross-cultural solidarity. The 1968 film, *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming* (title hereafter abbreviated), is a prime example. This essay will focus on how American films have portrayed the theme of reconciliation across racial and national difference through *The Russians Are Coming* and some films leading up to it. Through this discussion, this essay will address how the unique cross-cultural partnerships and reconciliations that existed in American literature have evolved in popular culture.

At first glance, the interracial partnerships in American literature discussed by Fiedler and the cross-cultural “buddy” relationships in the films that succeeded in this pattern seem to celebrate cross-cultural understanding. However, many commentators, including Fiedler, read into it a paradoxically hegemonic discourse. For example, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim, a black man, serves Huck, a white boy no older than his son, like a companion, and when Huck irresponsibly puts him in danger, Jim generously forgives him. This, Fiedler states, is an example of “the American dream of guilt remitted by the abused Negro (353).” In other words, he argues, partnerships with minorities are often expressions of white people’s desire to be accepted by them rather than accept them. In *Racial Stigma*, Brian Locke makes a similar observation about the portrayal of interracial solidarity in films made around the 1950s with racially reconciling themes. War films like *All the Young Men* in 1960 often portray reconciliation from racist conflicts between blacks and whites. Locke argues that the solidarity depicted in such films is not exactly a desire to reconcile with blacks but reflects the desire of white filmmakers and audiences to exonerate themselves of historical crimes of oppression by replacing their position from that of being enemies with that of being understanding protectors in the context of the growing civil rights movement (53). In other words, the white and black characters in these stories are required, for each other and for the audience, to be symbols representing their respective races rather than individuals. They are the allegorical everyman in the morality play of post-civil rights society, and their wills and actions seem firmly tied to the society to which they belong through the politics of race. Another example can be seen in the black prisoner in the 1958 film, *The Defiant Ones*, who finally gives up his chance to escape and stays with his dying white partner, waiting for the time of his arrest. The

reconciliation at the conclusion is a white conquest in which minorities willingly give up their freedom and safety for the sake of white ideals.

The partnerships between whites and blacks or Native Americans that have been repeatedly portrayed in American

literature and American films are often covered by symbolism that masks a history of persecution. In stories about the Cold War, however, partnerships or reconciliation can take on a different meaning. The Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was not one of discrimination due to colonial rule, nor were they enemies directly confronted on the battlefield. Diplomatic relations during the Cold War were very fluid, and thus narratives of the Cold War have expressed that confrontation and reconciliation in diverse ways.

The American film industry has not always been strongly hostile to the Soviet Union and communism. In fact, in its early years it even tended to portray them in an accommodating manner. Russel Campbell states that early 20th century American films often portrayed poor citizens and revolutionaries resisting the oppressive rule of imperial Russia with sympathy. For example, a 1905 film, *The Nihilist*, depicts the female activist of the Anti-tsarism as a heroine (4). The 1939 film, *Ninotchka* is a forerunner in the portrayal of cross-cultural reconciliation with the Soviet Union. This film, which depicts the love affair between a French aristocrat and a female Soviet diplomat, takes an approach similar to that of the conquering partnership that Locke criticized. Initially disdainful of each other's ideologies, the two gradually become attracted to each other through personal interactions, and in the end their love is fulfilled when the diplomat, Ninotchka, defects and abandons her homeland for love. The unique feature of the film, however, is that rather than one serving or granting forgiveness to the other, it suggests the possibility of an ideological switch between the ideologies to which both belong. A scene in which Ninotchka wears a modern hat she once hated shows her fascination with capitalist society, but at the same time, a humorous scene is performed in which Leon, an aristocrat, is so impressed by Marx's *Capital* that he recommends his butler to fight for his rights. While the story differentiates between the



Fig.1 From *The Defiant Ones*, a black prisoner with his dying partner.

characters of the two communities through stereotypical behavior, its reconciliation seems to suggest the possibility of adaptation and assimilation into each other's values rather than a compromise between the two communities. This potential for assimilation is emphasized not only in the context of reconciliation but also in the context of conflict. In the 1951 film, *I was a Communist for the FBI*, is a propagandistic film about an agent who goes undercover in a communist terrorist organization, but its depiction of him falsifying his beliefs to belong to the communist community and being scorned by his family and neighbors for doing so can be seen as a paradoxical "passing" story. Similarly, in the 1965 film, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, the spy protagonist Leamas receives secret orders to infiltrate East Germany under the guise of being a communist. However, Leamas sympathizes with an honest East German politician he meets there. Leamas despairs when he learns that he has been tricked by his colleagues into being sent as a decoy to subvert the politician. In the context of the Cold War espionage, the western protagonist disguised as a communist displays how essentially interchangeable both sides are.

The 1959 film, *The Journey* reverses the context of *Ninotchka* and depicts a new form of reconciliation. Diana, an American woman visiting Hungary, is detained when she is intercepted at a Soviet military checkpoint where the troop are looking for a fleeing pro-democracy activist. Diana and Surov, a Soviet officer, gradually fall in love, but Surov, knowing that Diana is protecting the pro-democracy activist, releases her to the West. Surov is murdered by the pro-democracy activists shortly after. The cold-hearted Ninotchka gradually accepts capitalism and softens her attitude, but Surov remains a threat to the detained American travelers and remains consistently unfriendly and frightening until he suddenly releases them at the end of the story. Rather, it is Diana, who is supposed to carry the audience's point of view, who changes her attitude. Originally, she was supposed to be under threat from Surov for harboring the democratic activist. Yet she eventually comes to like Surov. Correspondingly, the travelers who were supposed to be her friends become despicable, selling her out to Surov for their own protection, and in the end, the democratic activists become the villains in a tragedy: cruel assassins who shoot the honest Surov to death.

The important scene in changing Diana's and the audience's minds about Surov is the hospitality scene at dinner. Surov and his men sing Russian songs and dance at the dinner

table to console the travelers, who are growing frustrated with their detention. Surov is in such a good mood that he bites a glass cup like a cookie, which frightens the travelers. In other scenes, Diana witnesses that Surov constantly makes effort to deal with terrorists' attacks and local troubles. They are not idealized but their behavior of trying to console the travelers and failing with clumsy performances, betrays the image of the ruthless observers that the audience had assumed.



Fig.2 From *The Journey*, Surov eating a glass to entertain travelers.

Thus, even though the situation has not changed at all, Surov's portrait seems to highlight his personal, honest attitude, free from the image of communism and militarism. In *The Journey*, Diana represents the position of the Western audience, so she cannot abandon her homeland as Ninotchka did, she leaves Surov and returns home. Their reconciliation cannot sustain their precarious individualism when the narrative moves on to political issues. Ultimately, Surov's self-sacrificing devotion to the American Diana makes him the ideal Gentle, and their romance is maintained as a noble one.

In both *Ninotchka* and *The Journey*, the reconciliation of capitalism and communism takes place through the context of comedy. Mari Yonehara analyzes that what is necessary for a joke is to make the listener anticipate the ending from the context and to betray the listener by disclosing trivial facts. She argues that this is a technique that can be used in fraud or sleight of hand, where the conclusion does not necessarily have to be important or valuable, but the main point is in how contrary it is to the generality expected from the context leading up to it (9). The important point of jokes and comedies is that the surprise they create can make even simple or otherwise unpleasant information seem comfortable to the listener.

In films about Cold War romance in the 1960s, such comedic techniques of reconciliation become more emphasized. In the 1961 film, *One, Two, Three*, a young man in East Germany falls in love with the daughter of a wealthy American, but contrary to the popular image of spy films, he finds himself in all sorts of troubles due to the intrigues of the daughter's hanger-on capitalists. In *Romanoff and Juliet*, also from 1961, the daughter of the American ambassador and the son of the Soviet ambassador fall in love. The general of

a fictional small country in peaceful Europe, which does not even have guns, rallies the villagers and disguises itself into a crazy military state to protect the couple from their parents. This trick surprises the US and the USSR and brings them into solidarity.

The themes of conflict and reconciliation in the American context of the Cold War narratives take on a new perspective in *The Russians Are Coming*. The story begins with a Soviet Navy submarine that gets too close to the United States and runs aground off the coast of a small island in Massachusetts. The captain orders a platoon to procure a motorboat to tow the submarine. The platoon arrives at the old vacation home of screenwriter Walt and his family and attempts to rent a boat under false pretenses, but when they are discovered to be Russians, they threaten Walt at gunpoint and a young soldier named Alexei is put on guard while the rest of the platoon rob Walt's car and head for the docks. But Alexei becomes nervous in the menacing mood and he is disarmed by Walt's family, who take his gun and drive him out of the house. Walt's old car soon stalls, and when the Russian soldiers try to steal a post office car instead, they are reported by its owner. The owner's report exaggeratedly spread, and the islanders panic, believing that a horde of Russian soldiers has invaded. Led by Hawkins, a belligerent old veteran, a vigilante squad runs around the island looking for Russian soldiers and puzzles the sheriff. Walt frantically pedals his bicycle to the telephone station to report the presence of Russian soldiers to the US military, but unfortunately runs into a group of Russian soldiers hiding downstairs in the telephone station and he is unwillingly forced to help them. When Alexei confirms that the Walts have left, he sneaks into their house and retrieves his gun, but is discovered by the family babysitter, Alison, who is at home. Alexei apologizes to the frightened Alison and hands her the gun to show that he has no hostile intentions. Walt, concerned for his young daughter's safety, runs into Rozanov, a Russian platoon leader who has come to pick up Alexei, and they exchange gunfire. They reconcile when they learn that Alison and Alexei have fallen in love and are playing together at sea with their young daughter.

After procuring the boat and getting the submarine off the stranding, the Soviet captain tries to attack the city to save his face. The vigilantes also raise their guns and try to kill the Russian soldiers. But when a fence on the church tower breaks and a young boy watching the Russian submarine from the tower nearly falls from it, the vigilantes and Russian soldiers work together to create a scaffold on which Alexei can cross and rescue the boy. The mood in

the harbor is suddenly friendly, but the Hawkins had already alerted the U.S. military about the Russian submarine. To aid the Russians against an air strike, the islanders sail together with the Russian soldiers by surrounding their submarine with their own little fishing boats and escort them. The islanders and the Russian soldiers both rejoice and bid each other farewell in honor of each other as the U.S. fighters are bewildered by the sight and return home without action.

Unlike *Ninotchka* and *The Journey*, this film depicts the contact between the United States and the Soviet Union as a social encounter between groups rather than an individual love story. Although the story is a comedy, an extremely high tension is notable between the characters throughout most of the narrative. Walt's stubborn refusal to believe their son's story that Russian soldiers are in the yard at the beginning of the story and the Russian soldiers' attempts to deceive Walt with their clearly Russian-accented English are humorous, but when they hold a gun to Walt's head, the tension is so great that it would be out of place in a comedy. Surov speaks fluent English, but the Russian soldiers in *The Russians Are Coming* speak Russian except when speaking with the Americans. The audience can only infer the content of their conversations, which are by no means few, from their facial expressions and moods, and thus experience the same tension as the people on the island. At the Walt family's house, the Russian soldiers quickly give up trying to negotiate peacefully with the Walts, and the Walts, while fearing the Russians, do not listen to what they say and remain hostile throughout. However, the hostile



Fig.3 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, Russians threatening Walt.

tension between them is unlike the discriminatory hostility that appears in *The Defiant Ones*. If what takes place in *The Defiant Ones* is a communicative hostility in which whites speak to blacks in a discriminatory manner and blacks respond in kind, the hostility in *The Russians Are Coming* is a discommunicative hostility in which both sides deny the possibility of exchange and give up on communicating their intentions. Therefore, Alexei's naiveté, as he is bewildered and pathetically defeated by this menacing discommunication, seems to elicit more sympathy from the audience than Walt's strength, as he fights unarmed and takes the

gun despite the invasive situation of robbery and threats by the Russian soldiers.

In this story, the difficulties the characters face do not lead them to overcome them, to



Fig.4 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, the comical escaping scene of Walt and an operator.

show their devotion to each other, or to develop trust in each other.

On an island in a state of intense panic, Russian soldiers wear unnatural disguises and behave comically, and Alexei is chased around by dogs. Walt, who has been tied up with a fat telephone

operator woman, jumps up and tries to escape while the vigilantes are searching around for the non-existent Russian parachutists. The sheriff, fed up with the chaos, dispatches the drunk who follows him by ordering him to go to call for attention on horseback. The drunk man tries to mount his horse, but the horse runs away and he is unable to ride until the last scene. Large-scale and small-scale scenes are cut and switched one after the other, presenting these actions as equally nonsensical in the context of the comedy. This not only makes the individual scenes humorous, but it also seems to expose the fact that the strong communication-deficiency tension presented to the audience at the beginning of the film does not actually have any meaning.

Alexei and Alison show compassion for each other and reconcile through their romantic relationship, like Diana and Surov in *The Journey*. But what is truly unique about this story is the way it depicts a totally different kind of reconciliation through Walt and Rozanov. Walt returns home to find his daughter missing at home, and Rozanov notices that Alexei, his watchman, is also missing. The two men struggle violently, each believing the other has killed the person he came looking for. Rozanov drives his truck and tries to run over Walt, but Walt stands in front of him and fires at Rozanov, who is in the driver's seat. However, Walt is violently upset when he sees Alexei and Alison return with their daughter after hearing the noise. As Walt peers into the cab of the destroyed truck with a look of horror on his face, Rozanov, who had ducked down to avoid the bullets, responds jokingly, and a friendship is forged between them. In this scene, mutual distrust, more intense than mutual understanding, is demonstrated, and it appears as if a definitive catastrophe has been reached.

Their hatred is meaningless, and reconciliation is abruptly brought about between them by confiding their fear of the struggle to each other. In this scene, distrust and strife are not situations to be contrasted with a friendly reconciliation; rather, they are reconciled by distrust.



Fig.5 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, Walt being worried if he killed Rozanov.

This situation is similar to the reconciliation between Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby Dick*: Ishmael's prejudiced imagination of Queequeg as a "cannibal" in chapter 3, his fear and loathing when he enters the room, and his sleep in chapter 4. Grail Marcus describes Ishmael in this early section as a slapstick comedy (286). There is no active exchange or service between Ishmael and Queequeg. There is only the realization that their struggle through fear of each other is not being fulfilled and is not meant to be fulfilled. It makes them no longer strangers, but are bound together in a fraternity so out of touch with social conventions. When they leave their rooms in chapter 5, the other sailors in the inn are wondering about their sudden strange friendship.

Walt and Rozanov's reconciliation is the epitome of the hostile tension and nonsensical struggle that has been portrayed so far in the film; when Walt appears to have shot Rozanov dead, Walt feels fear rather than fulfillment and regrets that he may have taken Rozanov's life. Their hatred for each other is justified by their cause of avenging their family and friends, but by contrast the too peaceful and idyllic Alexei and Alison's interactions subversively render their cause nonsense. When their cause loses its meaning, they seem to have been left behind as completely individual entities in brutal violence. Therefore, for



Fig.6-7 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, Russian soldiers and islanders aiming their gun for each other with an atmosphere of high tension.

them, the fact that the destructive ending was not fulfilled may itself function as a bond that binds them together.

Walt and Rozanov's personal reconciliation is replayed as an island-wide reconciliation in the climactic scene. A Soviet submarine points a machine gun at the harbor, and in response, the vigilantes thrust countless rifles at the submarine. In a dangerous situation that could lead to war, the apathetic old sheriff confides his fears and asks if the hostility of both soldiers and vigilantes is a sign of fear. The next moment, a child almost falls from the tower, and without any command at all, the vigilantes and the Russian soldiers rush up and rescue the child. Once the child is rescued, the soldiers and the islanders praise each other's good deeds as if they were old friends. The scene is one in which people who had hated each other until that moment are united by the human compassion of saving a young child from mortal danger, but it is also a peaceful struggling alternative to killing each other, an unexpected event like a joke in response to the tension that has just been demonstrated. The reason why this all-too-abrupt reconciliation is so readily accepted, however, not only by the characters but also by the audience, may lie in the unexpected and dramatic subversion of values brought about by the comedy form. The audience shares with the characters in the play a hostile tension that seems to mirror the real world, and together they experience a situation in which dialogue is difficult because of fear, knowing that its nature is meaningless. By replacing the expected catastrophic ending with a more positive and unexpected one, the audience is freed from anxiety, like Walt finding out that Rozanov was not dead. This may allow them to modify their animosity and feel a sense of solidarity with the object of their former antagonism as one that has experienced the same anxiety and liberation.

The story also presents the social significance of the comical and dramatic reconciliation.



Fig.8 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, Russians and islanders cooperating to help a child.

When the islanders hear the news that the Air Force is coming, they scramble all the little boats they can muster to escort the submarine out to sea to protect the Russian soldiers. Neither the characters nor the audience can predict the effect of this action.

They simply stand by the submarine, and the implications of this will never be understood by the incoming fighters. Their actions are never negotiations guaranteed to be effective, nor are they a self-sacrificing devotion. The islanders are merely demonstrating by their actions that they are in psychological solidarity with the submarine crews, and the fighters are not persuaded by them, but simply lose motivation to attack because their cooperation is inscrutable. Here, cross-cultural partnerships serve to make it impossible for society to stereotypically define minorities, as the majority does not benefit from minorities but rather identifies itself inseparably with them. In other words, regardless of how faithful the partners are, the mere fact of solidarity itself redefines the minority other who is with us as an individual. And to this end, the reconciliation itself does not derive from morally interpretable motives such as devotion or negotiation, but rather from an abrupt and dramatic process that is incomprehensible to those outside the circle, such as that which surprised and stunned the sailors in the inn in *Moby Dick* or Hawkins when he returned from a call in *The Russians Are Coming*. It would have to be an abrupt and dramatic reconciliation that would be incomprehensible to the outsider. When persons whose attributes are inherently irreconcilable become friends, they become anti-establishment figures who subvert social conventions. They therefore embody a highly individualistic image of the American hero.

As Fiedler argued, there has always been a tradition of cross-cultural partnership in the mentality of American



Fig.9 From *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*, islander's little boats escorting the Russian submarine.

literature. It was often portrayed as an exploitative structure for the expression of ideological ideals when it came to domestic racial issues. But apart from this, the very structure of reconciliation and solidarity with other cultures may have also worked to ensure a spirit of anti-establishment individualism. The Cold War provided a stage in the popular narrative for conflicts outside of discriminatory histories and cultures, intensely hateful and tense, but with ambiguous interchangeability that could be replaced or disguised culturally. And perhaps the comedic form of anticipating and defying catastrophic conflict in the midst of tension was important in depicting the

social significance of cross-cultural partnerships in American literature, far removed from the ideological imperatives and messages of the Cold War conflict. The dramatic and comedic images of reconciliation and cooperation resulting from the highly discursive tensions depicted by *Russians Are Coming* may be the continuation and expression of the spirit of partnership in individualistic American literature, outside of social conventions and the demands of power.

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