

# 6 The future state

## Russian cinema and neoliberal cultural statecraft

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### Introduction

Jeanne L. Wilson (2016) examines Russian and Chinese cultural statecraft as a component of domestic and foreign policy, the aim of which is to provide a defence against the penetration of neoliberal Western values. I argue that, in the Russian case, the aim of cultural statecraft is quite different: it is to introduce and maintain neoliberal policies, borrowed from the West, whilst naturalising the neoliberal ideological discourse. The outcome of this cultural statecraft is a form of neoliberal nationalism, that is, a political system which employs neoliberal policies for nationalistic reasons (see, e.g. Müller, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Of course, the complexity of the Russian case is that Russia is a federation of nations with no ‘coherent sense of national identity’ (Wilson, 2016, p. 135). Hence, its nationalism is different from that of its European and North American counterparts and, as I discuss below, combines narratives of exceptionalism with those of internationalism. Thus, a new reading of the Russian case contributes to theories of nationalism, on one level, and theories of cultural statecraft, on another (see also, Strukov and Hudspith, 2019). As for the latter, this chapter argues that, in terms of the film industry since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian statecraft has emerged from a top-down system into a competitive one with state-funded, corporate, and private stakeholders using the medium of film to their advantage. This has involved the development of brands, the promotion of foreign policy, and participation in the global debate about future challenges.

The competitive model is apparent at the level of funding, distribution (Hollywood productions dominate the market; Strukov, 2016), and audience participation (Hollywood-style blockbusters are the most profitable outputs).<sup>2</sup> The competition has both centrifugal and centripetal, and internal and external, dimensions: between different funders (for example, state versus private funding), different realms of circulation,<sup>3</sup> and different levels of participation. Hence, Russian statecraft emerges as a system of balancing these different factors, aiming to make and offset profits in terms of financial gain, economic and political advantage, and attention and symbolic capital. In the Russian context, neoliberal nationalism defines a discursive

position which accounts for the process of rhetorically balancing the books. For example, the anti-Western rhetoric of the former minister of culture, Vladimir Medinskii, concealed the increase in the share of Western films on the Russian market. Furthermore, the promises of the Ministry of Culture to regulate the film market were an ineffective response to the demands of Western distribution companies for the government to eradicate piracy. Indeed, any consideration of the Russian film industry and statecraft must be made against the background of widespread piracy and disregard for intellectual property. It is, therefore, imperative that an analysis of Russian statecraft and cinema focus on its filmic articulations and imaginings and less so on data from the box office, because the latter is inaccurate and often misleading.

Wilson (2016) identifies the following areas for the application of cultural statecraft: cultural statecraft as a means to construct a state identity, as a foreign policy strategy, and as a means of legitimation and cultural security. More specifically, she notes that ‘an act of cultural statecraft involves a selective construction of cultural and civilisational themes that are seen as essential not only to the elaboration of a national identity but also to the maintenance of the security of the regime’ (Wilson, 2016, p. 136). To support her argument, she looks at the speeches of the president of the Russian Federation (henceafter the RF), Vladimir Putin, and examines both the Kremlin’s programme of instituting centres promoting Russian culture as well as recent national legislation restricting individual freedoms. When applying a top-down approach to the analysis of cultural statecraft, Wilson is effectively taking culture as a form of expression and meaning-making out of the equation and paying little attention to the economics of cultural production. This article compensates for these shortcomings by analysing how cultural statecraft is applied not in political speeches but in cultural practices and texts, and by engaging with the Russian culture industry – specifically, the film industry. In other words, I consider the elements of cultural statecraft – a means to construct a state identity, a foreign policy strategy, and a means of legitimation and cultural security – from aesthetic, cross-sectoral and institutional perspectives, and not exclusively from the perspective of the Russian government.

To achieve my objectives, I explore a particular case study, a film by one of the country’s most successful contemporary filmmakers, Fedor Bondarchuk. He is both an ascribed and achieved celebrity (Rojek, 2004), thanks to his pedigree and own achievements. He is the son of the director Sergei Bondarchuk (1920–1994), whose 1957 film *The Cranes Are Flying* [*Letiat zhuravli*] gained international acclaim. The elder Bondarchuk’s later adaptation of Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* [*Voina i mir*], broke records in terms of production costs, ticket sales, and the use of extras. Fedor studied in the most celebrated Soviet film school, the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (‘VGIK’) and, upon graduation, he set up a film production company, one of the first in the newly formed Russian Federation. Bondarchuk is known as a producer, actor, and director, having enjoyed

much prestige and visibility, including in popular media such as television, from the outset of his career. As a producer, he has participated in a number of successful commercial projects, including entertainment shows and PR campaigns. He has been an influential figure in the film industry, too, thanks to his patronage of the Kinotavr film festival and professional associations. Through his family and personal connections, and thanks to his career, Bondarchuk is linked to both Soviet and Russian elites, which makes him one of the architects of the current neoliberal regime in the RF.

In order to analyse and conceptualise Russian cultural statecraft, I focus on Bondarchuk's 2017 science fiction film *Attraction* [*Pritiazhenie*]. The film tells the story of Iulia (Irina Starshenbaum), who is a daughter of a general in the Russian security services, Valentin (Oleg Men'shikov). They live in the Moscow suburb of Chertanovo. A young man called Artem (Aleksandr Petrov) pursues Iulia romantically, but he is out of favour with Valentin, which puts Iulia at loggerheads with her father. One day, an alien spaceship crashes in the middle of Chertanovo, and Valentin becomes in charge of the rescue operation. In the meantime, Iulia meets Khekon (Rinal' Mukhametov), an alien who has arrived on the spaceship. Their encounter leads to instantaneous attraction; Artem's jealousy threatens to destroy not only Iulia and Khekon, but also the whole planet. The romance underpins the narrative, but, indeed, the main focus of the film is on the portrayal of the Russian army and its role in eliminating threats to global security. Through the framework of securitisation (Strukov and Apryshchenko, 2018), *Attraction* stages a spectacle of statecraft on both the national and international levels. Being one of the most expensive movies of the period, and directly funded by the Ministry of Culture, the film is an articulation of both the vision of a future state and of the role of the RF in world politics.

The film was conceived after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war of sanctions between the RF and the West, making *Attraction* an ideal case study for the analysis of the post-Crimea world order. The popular appeal of the film – it has been shown in the RF and internationally<sup>4</sup> – makes it a powerful tool not only for advancing a specific message but also for formulating the very agenda of the future state. When discussing the film, I pay special attention to how it engages with issues of domestic and foreign policy, how it represents the state and its systems of law enforcement (such as the police and the army), and how it legitimises the state and its powers. I reveal how the film supplies a vision for the future state, thus capturing cultural statecraft in the making. I argue that, in this film, Russian cultural statecraft – which entails the construction of a state identity and the development of a foreign policy strategy, and is a means of legitimation and cultural security – is explored as a theme, ideology and aesthetic.

In this chapter, a discussion of the film industry and its role in Russian cultural statecraft is followed by an analysis of the film. In the concluding section, I provide a conceptualisation of Russian cultural statecraft in relation to the ideology of neoliberal nationalism. My analysis is informed by

theories and methodologies of popular geopolitics, an interdisciplinary which examines the relationship between the popular and the political in the realm of popular culture. More specifically, I develop the notion of the ‘transregional feedback loop’, wherein Russian and ‘Western’ currents feed into and off each other (Saunders and Strukov, 2017). On one level, these flows sustain older geopolitical codes and frames, but on another, they develop new dimensions of exchange due to the vagaries of globalisation and new challenges.

### **The Russian film industry and cultural statecraft: The end of the government’s dominance?**

Cinema of the analogue era required much support from the state and private backers. In the Soviet Union, the state was the sole provider of funding to the film industry and exercised full control over all aspects of film production and distribution. In this regard, the film industry and cultural statecraft were fully aligned. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the late-socialist film industry went into a sharp decline (Beumers, 2009). Other causes of its demise were the radical reorientation of the public’s taste towards Hollywood-style cinema, widespread piracy, and the rise of television and eventually the internet as the principal platforms for the distribution of audiovisual content. Just like elsewhere in the world (see, e.g. Kim, 2003), in the 1990s, there were major changes in terms of the funding and distribution structure of the film industry, including the localisation and commercialisation of cinema towards a global audience. As a result of these changes, the late-socialist bond between the state and the film industry was severed, leading to a new dimension and configuration of powers in terms of cultural statecraft.

The global success of Andrei Zviagintsev’s *The Return* ([*Vozvrashchenie*], 2003) signalled the emergence of contemporary Russian cinema as a new aesthetic phenomenon (Strukov, 2016). It also promised a new contract between the state and the film industry, including regarding the role of cinema in cultural statecraft. Fast forward 20 years, and we are looking at a neoliberal system of the organisation of film production, which comes with a neoliberal system of cultural statecraft. According to this system, the state uses financial mechanisms to achieve its goals regarding nation-building, soft power, and symbolic economics. The system relies on competitive models of funding, namely, the coexistence of state and non-state actors on the market and the mixing of state and non-state funding even when the state supports a film production.<sup>5</sup> By compelling producers to seek additional funding on the open market, the state advances its agenda of general commercialisation and monetisation of all activities, including creative processes. For example, nowadays, there is an expectation that a film funded by the state will make a profit on the market (although that was certainly not an expectation when Sergei Bondarchuk’s *War and Peace* was produced). In

addition, repressive mechanisms of the state are used to force studios and filmmakers to adhere to the rules. For example, the state can initiate a legal case against filmmakers who have failed to deliver on their promises.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, an alternative system for financing the film industry has emerged, with two principal types of actors. The first encompasses privately owned studios that focus on the production of commercially successful projects. These studios are independent enterprises based in urban centres and relying on local talent and expertise. They produce their own content as well as participate in the US-led film production network, whereby production is outsourced to regions with cheap workforces. For example, a Voronezh-based studio called ‘Wizart Animation’, founded in 2007, is known internationally thanks to its feature-length animation films, such as *The Snow Queen* ([*Snezhnaia koroleva*], 2012) and *Sheep and Wolves* ([*Volki i ovtsy*], 2016). Competing with major US studios, Wizart Animation has carved out a niche by targeting non-English-speaking users or, in other terms, a world populated with different characters and filled with alternative geopolitical concerns. Wizart Animation has signed distribution agreements with major international companies and has participated in industry-wide competitions, including those in the United States and Japan. The studio has been impactful locally – it is a driving force for creative industries in Voronezh – and nationally, as it lobbies for Russian-made productions on global markets. The studio was founded by Vladimir Nikolaev, and from a local startup, it has evolved into a major player in the Russian film industry in the course of a decade.

These studios compete with the state in terms of revenues, and they have to seek alternative platforms, such as online streaming services, for the distribution of their content. For example, in 2020 Wizart was one of the first Russian animation studios to sign a contract with Netflix, thus participating in the US-led construction of a single cinematic realm for the world. In terms of cultural statehood, the state is in a response mode to projects such as *Masha and the Bear* ([*Masha i medved'*], 2009–). Created by Oleg Kuzovkov and co-produced by Soyuzmultfilm and Animaccord Animation Studio from Moscow, the animated series is loosely based on the oral children’s folk story of the same name. At one point, *Masha and the Bear* was the fourth most-viewed video on YouTube, igniting a global interest in Russian culture. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Strukov, 2021a), these studios advance Russian soft power independently from the state, straddling national borders and the boundaries between online and offline worlds. The studios rely on the ‘instantaneity of communication, multiple vectors of communication (many-to-many, not one-to-many), and non-linear forms of production and dissemination of content’, which is characteristic of cinema in the digital era.

The second type of actor encompasses initiatives which have a charitable dimension. Self-funding, crowdfunding and in-kind support have been used by filmmakers to release independent productions. For example, Seva

Galkin used crowdfunding to finance his short film about criminal gangs operating in Russia. Based on real events, his *Fans* ([*Fanaty*], 2020) is a story about two young men who, whilst being in a sexual relationship with one another, lure and murder homosexual men. Selected for screenings by international film festivals and nominated for a few awards, the film examines a social concern which cannot be funded by Russia's Ministry of Culture, which adheres to the ban on positive representations of LGBT issues among minors that was introduced in 2013. Galkin's film is one of many recent productions that engage critically with state policy and cultural statecraft. In comparison with the Hollywood blockbusters that dominate Russian cinemas (Strukov, 2016), these productions may seem to be too small and insignificant. However, such productions have been instrumental in developing and sustaining alternative modes of creativity and production, exploring themes that have been overlooked, and working with communities that have been marginalised. In fact, the response to the release of Galkin's film was immense, igniting debates in media about LGBT in the RF, criminality and the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens.

Most recently, in addition to the first and second types, another, new, and extremely influential actor has emerged. The Kinoprime foundation was set up in 2018 by Roman Abramovich, a billionaire who supports cultural initiatives in Israel, the RF, and the UK. Directed by Anton Malyshev, the foundation operates as an endowment, bringing together private investors and relying on independent expert opinions when making decisions about future projects. The foundation was created with the explicit objective of providing an alternative to the state system of support for the film industry. In its first 18 months of operation, the foundation invested 1.5 billion roubles into 27 projects, focussing on art house and mainstream cinema. Abramovich is known for supporting productions that explore sensitive topics, most recently *The Man Who Surprised Everyone* ([*Chelovek, kotoryi udivil vsekh*], 2018, directed by Aleksei Chupov and Natasha Merkulova). The film is set in a remote village where a man battles with cancer. A realisation of the possibility of imminent death compels him to embrace his true identity. After he comes out to his family, he is ostracised by the villagers. The film is about homophobia and transphobia, and about the role of state institutions in sustaining the patriarchal order. Abramovich has also provided financial support on a charitable basis to the Kinotavr film festival, which is the main platform for showcasing Russian art house and (non-)commercial cinema. With no other major Russian film festival existing, Kinotavr is an important element in the Russian film industry, as the private sector dominates in it. It is premature to draw conclusions about the role of Abramovich and the Kinoprime foundation, but it is already clear that the state is by no means the sole actor in the Russian film market.<sup>7</sup> This underlines how Russian cultural statecraft, at least as far as cinema is concerned, is a complex and evolving phenomenon whereby top-down, government-focussed approaches to its analysis are simply inappropriate.

In a situation in which Russian films are in competition with Hollywood blockbusters, on the one hand, and with online streaming services such as Netflix, on the other, the Russian state has focussed on productions that explicitly engage with the question of statehood and sovereignty. These are films that portray significant historical events, such as World War II, or which celebrate the achievements of Russian people on the world stage. In the former category, we find *Tanks* ([*Tanki*], 2018, directed by Kim Druzhinin) and many other films that explore the legacy of World War II from a nationalistic angle – that is, a perspective which emphasises that the Soviet Union was the main victor in the war. The latter category consists of biopics depicting athletes and other celebrities, such as *Legend 17* ([*Legenda 17*], 2013, directed by Nikolai Lebedev). These biopics tap into the feelings of nostalgia for the socialist period when the Soviet Union was a global leader in the arts and sports. They also tap into a feeling of entitlement which is particular to the period of Putin’s neoliberalism, in which glamour and celebrity have become part of the Russian official ideology and visual style (Goscilo and Strukov, 2010).

Movies in these two categories benefit from the style of Hollywood blockbusters, something that has been described in literature as the ‘patriotic blockbuster’ (Norris, 2012). Stephen M. Norris asserts that, at the start of the century, the connections between cinema, politics, economics, history and patriotism have led to the creation of “‘blockbuster history’ – the adaptation of an American cinematic style to Russian historical epics’ (Norris, 2012, p. 1). He identifies a range of strategies, including the depiction of tsarist Russia, which was viewed as a benighted world of political reactionism during the Soviet period; the exploration of issues of faith and organised religion, including the Russian Orthodox Church, that were also largely absent from the screens in the Soviet Union; and the retelling of historical fantasies, including animated films based on fairy tales and fantasy reworkings of historical events (such as the Time of Troubles being portrayed in the film *1612* ([*1612*], 2007, directed by Vladimir Khotinenko)). In my discussion, I develop Norris’ idea of the patriotic blockbuster by looking at the ways in which neoliberal nationalism has penetrated cultural statecraft. I also add to his conceptualisation by exploring a movie of science fiction, a genre which is overlooked in Norris’s research. I argue that science fiction is an important genre for the assessment of Russian cultural statecraft because, in addition to the examination of present-day concerns, it speculates about, or is even a model for, the future development of society. That makes it a cinematic roadmap for cultural statecraft. Also, Norris considers the Russian case exclusively from the Western perspective. His juxtaposition of Hollywood and Russian cinema creates a binary system of meaning, which is similar to the Cold War-era competitive model. A polycentric approach to world cinema dictates that *Attraction* should be considered in relation to multiple flows of meaning, not only the Hollywood one.

## Extraction economics

*Attraction* directly engages with current social and political concerns, such as ongoing de-/re-Sovietisation and the ‘conservative turn’, including issues of gender and sexuality. For example, Iulia’s father, Valentin, is played by a star of late-socialist cinema, Oleg Men’shikov. The choice of actor is meant to emphasise the links and ruptures in Russian recent history. In recent film and television productions, for example, the critically acclaimed series *Olga* ([*Ol’ga*], 2016–2020), a family with a single male parent is a trope which has replaced that of the missing or returning father, as seen in films such as Zviagintsev’s *The Return* and Aleksei Balabanov’s *Brother* ([*Brat*], 1998) (see, e.g. Goscilo and Hashamova, 2010). The inversion of the trope is an attempt to queer the traditional family, presenting the male parent in the role of both provider and carer (Strukov, 2021b).<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, in its representation of family and masculinity, *Attraction* subscribes to the imperatives of ‘the traditional values’ articulated in the law, which bans positive representations of LGBT persons to minors.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the film challenges these imperatives by presenting an image of a family which is traditional thanks to its queerness: single-parent households have been a permanent feature of post-war and post-Soviet Russia, after the lives of many men had been lost. In a similar way, Iulia’s queerness is expressed through her wearing of men’s clothes and by her acting as a leader of an all-male gang of friends. Indeed, Iulia seems to be attracted to men, but in actual terms, her only romantic relationship is with an alien, which raises questions about post-humanism, gender, and non-heteronormative sexuality. Similarly, *Attraction* is oriented towards both the domestic market (with its emphasis on binary constructions of gender and sexuality) and the international market (through its engagement with queerness). To be more precise, Russian statecraft attempts to speak simultaneously to both conservative and liberal entities in the world, producing a somewhat ambivalent, or bi-focal message, thus problematizing existing assumptions about the RF and its cultural statecraft. This transpires in the film’s science fiction context and its geopolitical concerns.

The alien, named Khekon, is a young man whose spaceship has crashed in the middle of the Moscow suburb of Chertanovo. At first, the viewer anticipates that he would attempt to destroy the neighbourhood – a common motif in Hollywood blockbusters – only to realise that he is on a different mission. Whilst Khekon is out exploring Chertanovo and making new friends, the spaceship begins to extract a valuable source – water – from the area around it. Apparently, water is needed to repair the spaceship: at the end of the film, when the spaceship lifts off, it blasts the water back onto the surface, creating one of the most striking visual moments in the film. However, the viewer is led to believe that the spaceship is to remove all the water from the planet. The inhabitants of Chertanovo are struck with two crises: one has to do with the destruction of infrastructure, including



apartment blocks, and the other with the loss of the most precious resource on Earth. The army is called in to supply citizens with water and to protect them from the threat of destruction. It cordons off whole areas and imposes a curfew, bringing life in Chertanovo to a standstill. Only essential services are allowed to operate.<sup>10</sup> However, with their knowledge of the local spaces, Iulia's gang is able to transgress these borders and access different facilities, evoking guerrilla tactics in warfare which we often see in Hollywood productions about Latin American countries and also sci-fi movies.

The focus on Chertanovo suggests a 'suburbanisation' of statecraft: the locus of conflict is no longer in the centre – the Kremlin – but on the margins, which implies that the central power is a permanent feature capable of withstanding all kinds of attacks. The suburbs are also Russia's new zones of social energy: with the centre of Moscow taken over by luxury shops and restaurants, 'real' people and their activities have been shifted to the suburbs, creating new socioeconomic clusters. In this regard, the film reveals recent changes in the organisation of the economy and society and an associated imagining of Russian statecraft: the emphasis is on the role of the 'ordinary' person, not a statesman, which signals the process of domestication and democratisation of statecraft generally. Indeed, one of the major figures of authority is a general of the Russian army, who is portrayed operating both from the headquarters of the Russian army as well as his own apartment. The apparent 'softening' of Russian statecraft is conveyed with the help of geopolitical metaphors, including the symbolism of water that I will discuss below. This softening is also evident at the conceptual level as a shift from defence strategies to risk management.

An alien invasion threatening humanity with annihilation, with a small group of individuals making contact and saving the world from destruction, is a common motif in Hollywood blockbusters. It has been used to articulate the concerns of American society tasked with safeguarding global peace and prosperity. For example, *Independence Day* (1996, dir. by Roland Emmerich) focusses on disparate groups of people who converge in the Nevada desert in the aftermath of a worldwide attack by an extra-terrestrial race of unknown origin. The American team leads a counterattack on 4 July, which is Independence Day in the United States. The film celebrates American nationalism, including the promise of an inexhaustible abundance of resources, and reaffirms the supremacy of the United States as a guarantor of peace and civil liberties (see, e.g. Mehring, 2010). *Attraction* borrows the agenda of *Independence Day* and reinterprets it for the present-day reality, such as with environmental catastrophes and the realisation that resources on Earth are not inexhaustible.<sup>11</sup> Russian statecraft oscillates between US politics and Hollywood aesthetics, and national concerns and traditions. References to the US canon allow for Russian concerns to be 'understood' by a global viewership, which is a standard tactic for all non-Western, 'world cinemas' (Nagib, 2011). On one level, *Attraction* responds to the global challenge of climate change; on another, it advances

Russia's supremacy as a guarantor of peace and prosperity, thus recreating a spectacle of nationalism, not universalism. More specifically, Russian supremacy is connected to natural resources, in particular water, and the extraction economy.

In *Fifth Element* (1997, directed by Luc Besson) and in Hollywood blockbusters, water is used as a symbol of life and fertility. Water has a similar function in *Attraction*: on their first encounter, Khekon puts a bracelet on Iulia's hand, and it begins to collect water, too. The bracelet symbolises the union between Iulia and Khekon and between earthlings and extra-terrestrial life. In addition, water is assigned a geopolitical meaning: it is a resource over which different civilisational actors compete to gain control. The film is infused with the imagery of water, which enables a connection between water and geopolitics. For example, the realisation that the spaceship is pumping water comes at the moment when Valentin is in a military facility and he notices that water is moving upwards inside a water cooler, which is due to the proximity of a part of the spaceship to that facility. The water bottle is labelled with the insignia of the Russian army, suggesting that water is both a resource and a weapon under the control of the state (see, [Figure 6.1](#)). In this way, water is securitised in the film and in the public discourse. Indeed, in recent years tourism to the Russian region of Lake Baikal, the largest reserve of fresh water in the world, has increased exponentially. Meanwhile, the north-western region of Russia, which is rich in lakes and various waterways, is now known as a destination for glamping. So water is a part of both Russian military and leisure industries, and hard and soft power.

Sharing some qualities with oil, water in *Attraction* is used to speak about Russia's role in the global economy as a provider of energy (in the present) and a provider of water (in the future). Fresh water features at the top of the Russian government's geopolitical agenda. In February 2012, *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, an official media outlet of the Kremlin, published a statement by President Putin in which he laid out his vision for the future foreign policy of the RF.<sup>12</sup> He spoke about future challenges, including environmental, economic and political ones. When articulating strategic goals, Putin made a reference to the geopolitical advantages of the RF, such as the size of the country and its position on the planet. He also listed resources which, in his view, would secure the leadership of the RF in the world, naming oil, gas, wood, agricultural land and fresh water. He noted that 'fresh water is a scarce resource and, in the near future, there will be geopolitical conflicts over access to water. Water gives us a geopolitical advantage. The state is conscious of the need to use this advantage carefully and strategically' (Putin 2012). Of course, customary international law provides a regulatory framework for riparian uses of water, but there are many examples when the law has not been observed, for example, in Europe and India (Bhogal and Kaszubska, 2017). In recent years, Ukraine has used water as a weapon against the RF, cutting supplies to the annexed territory of Crimea and, conversely, the RF has discontinued supplies of gas to Ukraine. Hence,

water is no longer seen in terms of a human rights agenda (the universalist system) but as a national privilege (the neoliberal agenda).

The Russian government is less concerned about the ecological turn in world politics, focussing instead on the economics of resource extraction. For example, in 2020, Russia's geopolitical strategy was revised to focus on the Arctic. The Arctic provides the RF with tools to challenge the Western military and economic supremacy. The Arctic is a particular visual world (Strukov, 2021c) characterised by the imagery of water in all its states: liquid, solid and gas. Indeed, whilst the action in *Attraction* is set in the Russian capital, references to geopolitical concerns in the Arctic are made through the imagery of water. This is seen, for example, when Khekon enters a military facility and makes water take the form of crystal, liquid and vapour, all seen in the natural environment of the Arctic. Even the shape of his spaceship is similar to that of an icebreaker moving across ice sheets. In this regard, *Attraction* reflects on the old (the Lake Baikal) and the new (the Arctic) range of water-based geopolitical facilities, affirming the notion of current Russian modernity as 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000). Shifting from hard to light modernity – from ice to water, and from oil to water – the RF emerges as a state of attraction, not repulsion, which is involved in the production of meaning in the global arena.

Indeed, in addition to Russian geopolitical concerns (a nationalist stance), *Attraction* articulates global environmental concerns (an internationalist stance). Similarly, Russian statecraft contains elements of both universalist and nationalist agendas. Indeed, the film speaks of the overuse of natural resources, such as water, and associated threats. These concerns are expressed literally through the imagery of warfare and metaphorically through the character of Iulia. Maria Engstrom (2018) has argued that, in recent years, the image of the daughter has replaced that of the mother as an emblem of Russian nationhood and nationalism (*Rodina-doch'* versus *Rodina-mat'*). This is valid in the domestic arena; however, on the international front, the situation is quite different.

I argue that, in the global context, the image of the daughter speaks of the universal values and new ethics symbolised, of course, by the figure of the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. Iulia challenges her father and other authority figures in their dealings with the aliens, calling for an immediate ceasefire and adoption of new policies both towards the aliens and people on Earth. As a matter of fact, *Attraction* was released internationally in 2018, the year when Thunberg challenged world leaders to take immediate action against climate change in a speech at the United Nations General Assembly. Though, of course, a coincidence, the Thunberg analogy is meant to reveal the RF's participation in world politics and international affairs at the level of state diplomacy and popular culture, suggesting that Russian cultural statecraft is rolled out synchronously at all levels of discourse. Indeed, the RF has inherited its special status at the UN, following the dissolution of the USSR, which it uses for different

purposes including climate change agreements, which the US, on the other hand, had withdrawn from. Finally, there is simultaneously an overlap and a divergence between the policies and visions articulated by the government and by cultural producers. This means that cultural statecraft is a broad field of interactions, supplying a nuanced, flexible strategy, not a top-down, command-style policy.

## Stability politics

*Attraction* features all the principal elements of Russian (cultural) statecraft: the military, the Duma, the media and cultural institutions, such as the Bolshoi Theatre. In all of them, 'Russia' emerges as both an originator of ideas and a keeper of traditions. For example, as Iulia and her gang move around Moscow, the camera shows the Bolshoi Theatre in the background. The building of the Bolshoi is an internationally recognised landmark, and the theatre itself is an institution synonymous with ballet, a cultural tradition of global importance. The theatre has survived several changes in political systems, and, like The Hermitage Museum, it continues to be one of the RF's leading cultural exports. The inclusion of the Bolshoi and its associated cultural capital means that the state is willing to exploit culture as a resource alongside natural resources – the culture-water analogy – thus complicating the debate about the relationship between the state and extraction economics. In fact, *Attractions* clearly signposts the movement away from extraction economics towards symbolic economics. For example, when Khekon arrives at Iulia's apartment, he changes into new clothes, with his t-shirt having an image of Gagarin on it, reminding viewers about Soviet achievements in the space race. These and other examples suggest that Russian cultural statecraft has more than one dimension: it is oriented both internally and internationally and makes use of different kinds of economics, including information economics supported by the media structure.<sup>13</sup>

When the news of the alien invasion breaks out, it is reported by Russia Today (RT), the Russian state-funded international broadcaster responsible for promoting the Putin government's agenda around the world. In the following shot, the same news is conveyed by the Cable News Network (CNN) and other international broadcasters, which places RT and Moscow, and by extension the RF, at the centre of global media flows. From the angle of cultural statecraft, this is an attempt to de-Westernise global political discourse and its representations in the media, which is in line with policies articulated by the Russian leadership (see, President of Russia, 2020). In fact, the Russian government has been investing openly in the construction of a media system alternative to the one in the West. For example, it has built its own social media and streaming platforms that are in competition with their Western analogues, which are also available on the Russian market, hence purporting a competitive, not a top-down, agenda. Ironically,

this system relies on Western technologies and symbolic economics, this achieving a difference at the level of discourse exclusively, and thus supporting my argument in favour of Russian neoliberal nationalism.

RT secured prominence after being a media outlet that disseminated the Russian narrative about the terrorist attacks and threats in the RF; however, later, it became apparent that RT was a tool aimed at challenging dominant Western media discourses globally. Internationally, RT is known as a proponent of neoliberal nationalism, including ‘loyalty to the state and its geopolitical concerns’ (Strukov, 2016, p. 185). It has been argued that ‘the government delegates the production and development of patriotism, understood as the state brand “Russia”, to media companies which, albeit being (partially and indirectly) sponsored by the government, operate as commercial enterprises, relying on income from advertising and competing with other outlets’ (Strukov 2016, p. 187). On one level, by referencing RT, *Attraction* mimics Hollywood blockbusters, always placing the US media, such as CNN, at the front. On another level, the film also feeds into a broader media framework, building a transmedia narrative (Jenkins, 2007) that eventually creates a whole world sustained by intermedial and transmedial interactions, with the RF at its centre, thus realising neoliberal nationalism as an actual infrastructure.

In the West, the Russian practice of constructing own systems – of media, communication and policy – is perceived as a threat with security and economic implications. In the RF, this practice is part of the government’s effort to de-centre the Western discourse and to shift the balance of power away from the West to other players. Since Putin’s speech in Munich in 2007, the RF has assumed the role of a power balancing out the West in world politics. This balance discourse – or stability politics – characterised Russian politics and cultural statecraft in the 2010s. The strategic deployment of Russian interests globally includes, among other things, the objectives of conservation, consensus and participation in non-Western organisations and campaigns. This has been particularly notable in the case of the war in Syria. It included efforts to stabilise the economy by using special financial reserve funds and building infrastructures, enabling alternative systems of supply, such as oil pipelines going via Turkey and across the Baltic Sea. At home, the Russian government has aimed at maintaining balance in economics, politics and security (Korolev, 2017). It also involved moves to offset the liberal gender turn in the West by introducing conservative legislation at home, such as the law against the promotion of LGBT issues among minors.

*Attraction* supplies a visual representation of this balancing politics and a strategic formulation of future concerns for cultural statecraft. For example, after the spaceship crashes in the middle of Moscow, the Russian army assumes the role of protector of the planet and human race from the alien invasion. It does so by building a wall around the crash site, thus isolating the aliens and any humans who happened to be in the zone.

This politics of isolation has become mainstream in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, at the time when the film was released, it looked radical in its rejection of other potentialities, including the narratives of exploration, siege and destruction that we find in Hollywood blockbusters. What *Attraction* shows is that life will go on even in isolation. This is, indeed, a narrative pursued by the Kremlin since the introduction of sanctions against the RF after the annexation of Crimea. Indeed, the government has used the context of isolation to restructure the economy and advance security.

In terms of cultural statecraft, *Attraction* articulates two messages. The first is that the RF is capable of retaliation – economic and military – and that it will retaliate on its own without seeking the support of international institutions. The second is that, given a choice, the RF will opt for non-aggressive means of conflict resolution, but that it will do so on its own terms, thus affirming its sovereignty at home and its influence internationally. Indeed, the turning point in the film narrative is the realisation that Khekon's spaceship crashed because it had been attacked by the Russian military. *Attraction* postulates that the RF is capable of a counterattack but that it would not launch an attack unless it had first been attacked itself. This Soviet-era mantra of non-aggressive withholding is familiar to political observers, and it is a central motif of the film, as revealed through the conflict between Artem and Khekon. They epitomise two forms of power (hard and soft, respectively) and diverging means of communication (aggression and persuasion). As their conflict is centred on the question of who controls both Iulia (daughter-motherland) and Chertanovo (a local context, or 'home' which would translate into Russian as 'malen'kaia Rodina'), it reveals opposing forms of Russian cultural statecraft, namely, that its powers are simultaneously those of threat and attraction.

The film starts with Artem trying to seduce Iulia, but his plans are thwarted after the spaceship smashes into their building. Soon after Iulia meets Khekon, she falls in love with him, although she is angry with the alien for killing – inadvertently – her best friend. The first part of the film is about juxtaposing Artem and Khekon as individuals. The former is outgoing, plain, and violent; the latter is reserved, sophisticated and persistently non-aggressive. The film presents a binary structure of discourse, giving Iulia – and, through her, the country – a set of hard choices. Iulia chooses Khekon, but only upon realising that he has greater powers, including the power to maintain eternal life. Khekon represents the romantic type, a traditional gentleman, whereas Artem stands for the revolutionary type, a man who always transgresses boundaries. Of course, the viewer is first infatuated with Artem whilst Khekon appears helpless making exploratory steps on Earth; however, eventually, the balance shifts in favour of the alien. Artem's jealousy is shown as a destructive force: to win back Iulia's attention, he initiates a resistance movement. A canny politician, he appeals to the Muscovites' fear and sense of despair, and he builds an army of supporters

who follow his lead to destroy the spaceship. Artem's stance is characterised by nationalist politics: his slogan is that they should take back their land ('*Eto nasha zemlia!*'), which, of course, references US President Donald Trump's presidential election slogan and thus affirms neoliberal nationalism as the foundation of Russian cultural statecraft.

The central scene of the film is a confrontation between three forces: the protesters, the aliens and the army. Artem's supporters – who are framed as members of a grassroots protest movement – launch an attack on the spaceship. According to their protocol, the aliens are to defend the spaceship and thwart its destruction in order to prevent the imminent annihilation of all life on the planet. Iulia, her father, and the army generals take on the roles of negotiators and peacekeepers, aiming to keep the protesters under control and secure the safety of the spaceship; yet, they continue to consider the spaceship as a foreign entity. In the final battle, the aliens and the army work in tandem to restrain the protesters and contain the attack in order to avoid the threat of annihilation. In this regard, they act in the interests of the local people (the nationalist stance) and all humanity (the internationalist stance). The army and the aliens are to achieve a compromise and maintain balance, but sacrifices must be made: in an attack orchestrated by Artem, both Khekon and Iulia are dangerously wounded. Khekon makes an additional sacrifice by giving Iulia his power to regenerate so that she fully recovers. The sacrifice, which is in line with the Russian patriotic narrative,<sup>14</sup> is needed to achieve stability at the intergalactic level. The unification of the family – Iulia and Valentin rebuild their relationship after Khekon's departure – symbolises the union of the state and the nation, respectively. Complete stability is thus established, and the purpose of Russian cultural statecraft is achieved.

Artem's character is central to our understanding of Russian politics and cultural statecraft. In the beginning, he is presented as a young rebel willing to stand up against Valentin's authority both as Iulia's father and as a colonel of the Russian army. Artem takes on the role of the chief protector of the young woman and the nation that she symbolises. However, in the second part, *Attraction* diverges from Hollywood conventions, with Artem's role changing to that of an aggressor and challenger of the world order and a betrayer of the woman whom he loves. This is due to the populist politics that Artem embraces: he and his gang plan a revolt against the dominance of the aliens and, possibly, of the government. The film shows all stages in the preparations of the revolt – from the gang's initial meeting, to the posting of messages on social media and the organisation of a meeting with supporters (see, [Figure 6.2](#)). This way, it documents the Kremlin's narrative about the political opposition in the RF which is often seen as something alien, 'imported' and thus inauthentic, which – as a narrative – works – as a means to securitise any form of dissent.

The narrative includes the notion of non-systemic with opposition, the purpose of which is the destruction of Russian statehood with no

alternative vision for the future (Ross, 2015). Indeed, Artem is shown to be completely overwhelmed by feelings of jealousy and hatred as he plots his revenge on Khekon. The film emphasises Artem's political shortsightedness: he is not capable of thinking of long-term political objectives, thus threatening stability on Earth. He steals weapons from the spaceship, including a protective suit; when he puts that on, he appears as an evil alien, not like the good alien Khekon, who is dressed in civilian clothes. The Manichean separation of politics characterises the ideological structure of the film, with the threat emanating from the 'uncontrollable' forces of the political opposition. *Attraction* reflects on Russian internal politics and speculates about international politics. One should read the film as an attempt to reframe the Russian official narrative of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as well as the emancipatory movements in the West. As I mentioned above, the threat lies in the movements' external/alien origins, thus implying that the role of cultural statecraft is to naturalise all processes, including those of protest.

This notion of stability politics is symbolised by the imagery of water. As a substance, water can take on any shape, thus achieving balance. Cultural statecraft is compared to water and its properties: its purpose is to mould discourse – to give water a shape – in order to achieve stability. *Attraction* offers a vision of the future when stability is fully realised: in a nightclub during a rave party, Khekon shows Iulia his planet. For a few seconds, Iulia is transported to another universe, where she learns that, in the future, all technology will be water-based, securing a balance between the conservation and exploitation of resources. The modernist vision of the future – with complex architecture and an infrastructure that seems to have fully conquered nature<sup>15</sup> – is presented as a visual spectacle aimed at seducing Iulia and the viewer. The most appealing aspect is that humans will achieve eternal life. According to the thinkers of early space exploration, such as Nikolai Fedorov, in the future, people will indeed reach other planets and live forever. This philosophy undergirds Russian nationalist narratives of the 20th and the 21st centuries (Groys, 1992; Goscilo and Strukov, 2010). However, the film is not a propagandistic tool, as it offers a critique of this vision, too. Indeed, Khekon has eternal life, but it transpires that he is the only person inhabiting his world. There are no other living creatures either on his planet or spaceship, so his eternal world is a solitary one, raising concerns about the kind of future he shows to Iulia and other humans. In this sense, the film carries a warning message about future crises including climate change and shortages of vital resources. Also, though firmly rooted in the ideology of neoliberal nationalism, *Attraction* speaks critically about privilege and entitlement promulgated by neoliberal nationalism and realized in the vision of individualism, which in the film, appears as absolute loneliness. Therefore, I have sufficient evidence to suggest that Russian cultural statecraft is concerned with political, economic, and also ontological issues.





*Figures 6.1 & 6.2 Stills from Bondarchuk's Attraction.*

### **Conclusions: The state of intergalactic proportions**

The genre of science fiction allows the director to express political and social concerns relating to both the domestic and international arenas. Unlike Soviet science fiction, contemporary Russian science fiction is grounded in the spectacle as a principal means to communicate ideological messages. In this regard, *Attraction* displays features of both classical and post-classical film narratives. Retaining the features that have secured success in the past, ‘the post-classical is also the excessively classical cinema, a sort of “classical-plus”’ (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002, p. 63). To be precise, *Attraction* encompasses the Hollywood canon as a classical narrative and diverges from the Hollywood canon as a post-classical narrative. Thus, *Attraction* – and the cultural statecraft that it represents – is aligned with both Western and non-Western political and social concerns, including climate change, the post-colonial condition, and the exploitation of resources.

In *Attraction*, science fiction tropes are rehearsed to make the story accessible to the global viewership (the foreign dimension of cultural statecraft) and reinterpreted in order to naturalise the neoliberal ideology (the domestic dimension). For instance, *Attraction* is not concerned with the reinstalment

of the traditional family – like films in which separated partners are brought together after they resolve all challenges, such as *Jurassic Park* (the USA, 1993, dir. by Colin Trevorrow and others) – but instead focusses on the parent-child relationship. In the Russian context, this is about privileging historical rather than contemporary connections: the objective is to restore historical lineage and to fill in the ideological void left after the introduction of neoliberalism as a state ideology. An alien intervention is needed to reassemble the elements of the state. Hence, the invasion is to be read as a strategic articulation of cultural statecraft, whereby the future is imagined in the now by agents who, one way or another, are linked to the state elites.

Thus, *Attraction* offers a robust programme of cultural statecraft, including domestic and foreign policy components, elements of soft and hard power and different visions of how the RF as a state should maintain a leadership role in the world. Its cultural statecraft is based on neoliberal values and policies, such as free markets and individualism, and it has both universalist and nationalist takes, making the RF a case of neoliberal nationalism. The film makes use of a range of tropes and changes in the plot in order to naturalise neoliberalism, giving the Russian state an advantage both domestically and internationally. Its narratives of exceptionalism are linked to the country's geographic position and natural resources, less so to its history and 'fight for freedom' which we find in Hollywood blockbusters and also productions from Brazil, China, South Korea, and other countries. *Attraction* methodically explores cultural and civilisational themes, adding emphasis to topics such as climate change and migration. The scope, role and direction of the state are vast and diverse – the state of intergalactic proportions. This means that, in the geopolitical system of *Attraction*, there is no other power but the state, which can withstand an alien attack and the threat of annihilation. An analysis of the film has also revealed the state's anxiety about grassroots movements, including protest movements aligned to the liberal West but also to the conservative West, such as Trump's nationalist supporters. The discussion has shown that Russian cultural statecraft should be comprehended at the level of aesthetic, cross-sectoral and institutional perspectives, not exclusively official speeches. The polycentric approach to Russian cultural statecraft allows to evaluate the multi-dimensional realms of the Russian state, state-funded and private actors, and Russian symbolic economics.

## Notes

1. The equation of neoliberalism with internationalism has been challenged in literature. See, for example, Harmes (2012).
2. This assumption is based on data published by <https://www.kinopoisk.ru/box/>, showing Russian box office distribution per film and country.
3. Unlike France or China, Russia does not have a quota system regulating the number of imported films or the ratio of domestic and international productions in circulation.

4. The film was shown in forty-three countries, including Germany, Japan, Malaysia, and the UK.
5. Through Kino Fond, the state can provide up to seventy per cent of total funding, but in practice such assistance is normally around fifty per cent.
6. For example, in 2013, crowdfunding was used to collect money to pay off the fine imposed by the Ministry of Culture on a film director (BBC News, 2013). It is noteworthy that fines have been given out to film directors who are known for their public support of Putin, such as Nikita Mikhalkov.
7. At the time when final version of the chapter was being confirmed with the publisher, it was announced that two films supported by Kinoprime were included in the official programme of two leading European film festivals. *Unclenching the Fists (Razzhimaia kulaki, 2021)* by Kira Kovalenko won the Un Certain Regard Prize of the Cannes Film Festival, and *I'm home, mother (Mama, ia doma, 2021)* by Vladimir Bitokov was included in the Orizzonti Extra programme of the Venice Film Festival. On one level, these facts signify the increasing importance of Russian independent cinema, especially films created by early career filmmakers. On another, they reveal a postcolonial turn in Russian film industry whereby films supported by Kinoprime focus on contemporary issues in North Caucasus, a region longing for global visibility. The last relies on both the transnational nature of Russian capital and Russian visual culture: both Kovalenko and Bitokov are graduates of a film lab led by Aleksandr Sokurov, a world leading director.
8. A similar concern can be seen in the television series *Olga*, see, Strukov (2021b) for an analysis.
9. The law is dubbed the 'Russian Section 28' in reference to the Section 28 law adopted in the UK in 1988 under the government of prime minister Margaret Thatcher, which also banned positive representations of LGBT to minors. That law was ultimately repealed in 2003.
10. Working on the revisions of this chapter during the global lockdown, I became particularly aware of the global resonance of the film, including the impositions of draconian policies restricting individual freedoms.
11. A comparative analysis of *Attraction* and Hollywood blockbusters, as well as productions from other countries that explore similar issues, such as *District 9*, a 2009 science fiction film directed by Neill Blomkamp, is a task for another publication.
12. A translation into English is published on the site of the Russian World Foundation.
13. Just like with the issue of climate change, the reference to Gagarin and the Soviet lead in the space race contains nationalistic and universalist ideas, with the figure of Gagarin – the modern-day Icarus – being destined to save humanity through his own demise. See, Strukov and Goscilo (2017).
14. See, for example, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.
15. The rhetoric of conquering nature is particular to Soviet modernist projects.

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