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Rocky IV as a Groundbreaking Film (2023-2024)

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“*Rocky IV* as a Groundbreaking Film”

Matthew Croote (research inquiry example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

In this research inquiry, Matthew Croote takes up a later film in the Rocky franchise to argue for its importance in understanding Cold War relationships, using sport as a vehicle to that exploration, and still maintaining entertainment and cohesion with the film franchise as a whole. As you read Croote’s essay, consider:

- What helps to make Croote’s research most effective for you as a reader? Are there particular sources that were more helpful or compelling than others? What can this suggest about your own search for or use of sources?
- Croote structures his argument in three parts based on engagement with real world events, use of sport as a vehicle for the film’s narrative, and entertainment. How or why do you think Croote arrived at this sequencing of ideas? How does the sequence of parts help to strengthen Croote’s argument? What might this suggest in the way you approach sequencing your own points, evidence, or sources?
- One of the main arguments that Croote makes is the deft way in which *Rocky IV* takes on the Cold War attitudes and events of the time, while simultaneously avoiding pure propaganda in its final message. Does your own research inquiry have a strong centralized idea? How does a thesis like Croote’s help to organize both the points and counter-arguments of the piece? Is this similar or different from your own thesis and structure?

Rocky IV as a Groundbreaking Film by Matthew Croote

Rocky IV is the fourth installment of the Rocky series, in which an amateur boxer from Philadelphia gets his chance to go pro. This movie is focused on Rocky Balboa’s (Sylvester Stallone) fight with a boxer from the USSR named Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren). Rocky flies to the USSR for the bout and experiences the hardships that any American would have during the Cold War. *Rocky IV*, released in 1985, has a storyline that fits along the transition of the Cold War and the relationship between the USA and the USSR at the time. Although the story and characters are fictional, there are still some very real situations that are displayed throughout the movie. *Rocky IV* is a groundbreaking film because it is able to display the events happening in the current political environment, it shows these events through the use of sport, and the story is interesting enough to keep the watcher engaged but not overshadow the meaning of the film.

The first reason that *Rocky IV* is a groundbreaking film is because the film shows current events in the film rather than events that had happened in the past. During the mid-1980’s and into the 1990’s, the Cold War was beginning to come to an end. However, this did not happen until the USA and the USSR had both experienced a significant increase in political tensions. Olav Njolstad writes in his article *The Last Decade of The Cold War From Conflict Escalation to Conflict Transformation*, “In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter abandoned détente and inaugurated a new phase of confrontation. He did so reluctantly in response to what he saw as

significant escalation of a growing Soviet threat since the late 1970's" (Njolstad 149). The tensions between the two countries were beginning to ease, but then in the late 1970's the Soviet Union had made a direct military intervention in Afghanistan that was seen by the USA as a hostile act against them. This forced former president Jimmy Carter to usher in a new period of hostility against the USSR in the early 1980's. John Lewis Gaddis writes in his article *The United States and the end of the Cold War: implications, reconsiderations, provocations*, "By the end of 1982 there had developed, as a consequence, the strongest upsurge in public concern over the danger of nuclear war since the Cuban missile crisis" (Gaddis 122). This same event is paralleled in *Rocky IV*. In the beginning of the film, Rocky's once enemy but now friend Apollo Creed decides to come out of retirement and fight the Soviet Boxer. In a series of unfortunate events Creed is killed in the ring and Rocky decides to fight Drago as well. Lejla Dautbašić writes in her article *US Soft Power Though Hollywood During the Cold War: Rocky IV*, "the clash between the two superpowers and, through boxing, this serves as the allegory and comparison of the war." (Dautbašić 5). In the beginning of the movie, the theme of the USA versus the USSR is very present such as Creed dressing up as Uncle Sam or the two boxing gloves with each nation's flag printed on them. This increased form of hostility is exactly what had happened in the Cold War a few years prior to the release of the film. As the decade continued, however, tensions between the two nations began to subside and the relationship started to improve. Njolstad writes, "During the summer of 1984, the Reagan administration reached a consensus that the United State had indeed recovered its strength sufficiently to be able to enter into negotiations with the Soviet Union with confidence." (Njolstad 153). After a few years of increased hostility with the Soviet Union, the United States finally had felt that it was in a position of enough power to be able to negotiate with the USSR. These negotiations would take a few years but they did progressively decrease tensions between the two countries. This is also seen in *Rocky IV*. During the movie, Rocky is training in the Soviet wilderness before the fight. He trains and works to the point where he is ready to fight Drago. The fight is a long and grueling one but eventually Rocky comes out on top.

Rocky IV is a groundbreaking film because it also uses sport to show the current political relationship between the two nations. One of the main foci of the film is the difference in the training techniques between the two nations. During this period, especially in sport, the USSR had been working to increase advanced technology production. The USA also had been performing research and creating technology, but not at the same rate as the USSR. Gaddis writes, "Neither the Russians nor the Chinese ever came close to challenging the United States and its Western Allies in overall economic and industrial strength. But their possession of nuclear weapons was an 'equalizer' of sorts, in that it gave those countries the ability to compete with the West at least in military terms" (Gaddis 116). The Soviet Union would not have had the ability to negotiate or sustain the Cold War for as long as they had without the development of their nuclear technology. The USA understood that the weapons the Soviets possessed could still hurt them if they made the incorrect move. This is very clearly shown in the film. Dautbašić writes, "Drago, [...] is a government project by the USSR and a lot of money has been invested in him, in his training ground and his equipment" (Dautbašić 5). Drago had things like a complete indoor training facility with a track, and a machine that is able to track his punching power. The trainers and researchers that he works with also had statistics from other boxers to compare. This is very advanced technology for the time and shows what the Soviets had been focused on doing during this stage of the Cold War. Their athletes were working with top-notch technology, some of which is later found to be against the organization rules at the time. Rocky

is in a completely perpendicular situation to Drago's. Dautbašić writes on Rocky, "Rocky, on the other hand, is an immigrant that fought to the top and still stays humble, as he comes to Russia and trains in the wilderness, in the snow, running up the mountains, using wood and rocks as weights and chops trees as his workout." (Dautbašić 5). There is a stark contrast between the conditions that the two fighters faced in the months leading up to the fight. Rocky still had some equipment and it was decent, but it was nothing compared to the technology that Drago had been provided to train. This is symbolic of the Cold War because the Soviets were much more focused on the advancement of their technology compared to the United States. Njolstad writes, "And it was only after Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that the many unsolved questions relating to funding, allocation of resources, manpower shortages and command structures were fully addressed" (Njolstad 169). The USA was clearly behind the ball compared to the USSR and this is demonstrated in the film. This use of sport is not often used to do what it did in *Rocky IV*, and that is why it is a groundbreaking film.

The third reason that *Rocky IV* is a groundbreaking movie in film is because the story was good enough to get people in the seats, but it does not stray from what it set out to do. *Rocky IV* has the luxury of having a developed storyline to build on, and it takes full advantage of that fact. The director knows that a good story is necessary to be able to get a point across, and this movie achieves that. Even though the story is enjoyable at face value the true message behind the film is what makes it uniquely groundbreaking. Stallone can take a very sensitive topic such as the Cold War and make it palatable for the general public. Many films either have a good message but aren't able to convey it well or have an interesting story and lose sight of what it is trying to achieve. *Rocky IV* is able to get the best of both worlds. An example of this is the final scene of the movie. Dautbašić writes, "Another important scene in the movie is the speech that Rocky gives in the end of the fight, when he speaks politically, saying that the Soviet mass cheered on him and accepted him, regardless of his nationality" (Dautbašić 6). Stallone is able to deliver his message in a feel-good medium so that the watcher is invested but clearly receives the message of the film. His message of "we should all get along" would come at a good time as the tensions were easing between the two nations. Njolstad writes, "By the end of 1990, the Cold War was over, as well (surprisingly) virtually universally recognized, even though a transformed and still changing Soviet Union remained for another eventful year until processes in the unsuccessful internal transformation caused the Soviet people to implode" (Njolstad 154). Even though the official end of the Cold War had not arrived until a few years after the movie was released, Stallone is able to understand the direction that the war is heading in and wants to share his message. The ability of Stallone to keep the watcher interested in the movie while still being able to convey his message creates a groundbreaking film.

Some may argue that *Rocky IV* is not an important film because it was used to spread American propaganda surrounding the Cold War. The Russians are often stereotyped throughout the movie as silent and stoic killers. This is highlighted during the press conference where the trainers speak about how they have used machines and analytics to maximize Drago's potential in the ring. This is also on full display in the Drago versus Apollo Creed fight when Drago delivers his infamous line, "If he dies, he dies." Tong Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood write in their article *Cold War Sport, Film, and Propaganda*, "In it, the Soviet Boxer, Ivan Drago (Dolph Lundgren), personifies the faceless, robotic nature of Soviet Society – an emotionless lab rat pumped up with steroids and computer-programmed to handle every ring situation (apart from the American Spirit). By contrast the warm-hearted Rocky (Stallone) eschews technology and trains by felling

trees and running to the top of the Ural Mountains”(Shaw and Youngblood 167). There is a clear difference between the training styles of the two characters and that displays stereotypes that were curated by Americans during the Cold War. The stereotypical American mindset that “everything is bigger in Texas” is also on full display during this fight. Apollo comes out in his costume backed by strobe lights and loud music. Drago’s entrance however is quite different. He comes to the ring with a stone-cold stare and a look of pure concentration on his face. Despite this, that argument is incorrect. If Stallone had created the movie simply to push American propaganda, the ending scene would have been entirely different. In the ending scene of *Rocky IV*, the Soviet crowd ends up turning on Drago in favor of Rocky. Rocky then delivers his message to those in the Soviet Union who are watching. Dautbašić writes, “The timing of the movie and a powerful speech made a lot of influence, as Rocky said ‘If I can change, and you can change, everybody can change’” (Dautbašić 6). If Stallone’s goal was to push American propaganda to the public the message would have read something entirely different such as “If I can beat a Soviet then you can too.” But choosing the message of peace shows that Stallone’s intentions are to bring an acceptance between the people of the two nations in an attempt to end the Cold War.

Rocky IV is a groundbreaking film in the movie industry. This is because the film showed active political tensions between the USA and USSR during the Cold War, it uses sports to symbolize the relationship between the two nations, and the message of the film is received by the watcher while still having an interesting plot.

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