

The Public's Opinion About "Amerika"'s Impact on the Public

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ABC's "Amerika" series generated considerable controversy and debate long before the first episode aired on February 15, 1987. The sevenpart series, which portrayed life in the U.S. a decade after a bloodless Soviet take-over, drew criticism from many quarters. In a letter to The New York Times, former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union George Kennan lambasted the program, asking "what good purpose could be served by feeding this unreal nightmare hour after hour into the minds and imaginations of a considerable portion of the viewing public?" The Soviet and Polish governments also had harsh words for the series. Rzeczpospolita, the official Polish newspaper, charged that the program's goals were "scaring American society, shaping a belief that that the Soviet Union is threatening America." Pravda called the series "a deliberate act of psychological warfare" intended to "whip up hatred for the Soviet people and the Soviet Union." (Keller, 1987)

In this country, the protests came from peace activists who believed that the programs constituted "dangerous right-wing propaganda" that could exert a profoundly negative impact on U.S.-Soviet relations. Weeks before the first episode aired, liberal activists protested the series. A Wisconsin housewife, Jane Shirmer, collected 7,000 signatures on a petition that called for ABC to grant broadcast time for opposing views. Numerous peace groups distributed informational packets to public schools; and one group of activists demonstrated outside ABC's New York headquarters, deriding the program as a 15-hour advertisement for Star Wars. At the same time, there was even some conservative demonstration of support for the program. A group of 35 Lithuanians staged

a pro-"Amerika" demonstration in Los Angeles, saying that "Americans should watch the series so they realize that a threat of communist overthrow is real" (see Wolcott, 1987).

For its part, ABC defended the program, with Entertainment president Stoddard calling it a "civics lesson in the blessings of democracy." The controversy became so heated that the United Nations, whose insignia appeared on peacekeeping troops that the program depicted as communist goons, hired an attorney to help convince ABC to run a disclaimer about the use of the United Nations symbol in a dramatic program of this kind. The Chrysler Corporation even withdrew \$7 million worth of advertising spots, explaining that the portrayal of a Soviet take-over of America was not the optimal environment for advertisements that patriotically announced that "the pride is back."

Naturally, the controversy attracted considerable media attention. Television specials presented an in-depth look at the "storm over 'Amerika'," and newspaper and magazine articles covered the controversy, if somewhat whimsically. For example, the week that the series was scheduled to begin, a Newsweek article began by asking: "Well, will we or won't we," and continued, "The United States of America has been hearing about ABC's 'Amerika' for months; now the only question is whether it will set aside seven nights next week for a 14 and one half hour maxi-series that gotten almost nothing but bad press from day one." Echoing this sentiment, The New Republic asked in an article that appeared immediately prior to the broadcast: "To paraphrase Freud, what do Russians want? Do they want to woo our starlets and steal our limousines? Would they force

our wives and mothers to dress in the 'Dynasty' style?...

These reactions and expectations raise a number of research questions, not unlike those primed by earlier media extravaganzas--i.e., "Roots" (Hur and Robinson, 1978; Surlin, 1978). In the present case, the questions focused on both the perceptions that "Amerika" exerted on the public, as well as its actual effects on public beliefs.

Perceptions of media effects.

Our research was guided in part by Davison's (1983) model of third-person effects. While much classical research on public opinion and mass media takes the media as a starting point and attempts to examine media impact on public beliefs and attitudes, Davison adopted a dramatically different approach. Davison argued that mass media effects may not be primarily due to the actual reactions of the intended audience of a message but, instead, to the actions of those who anticipate or think they perceive some reaction on the part of others (Davison, 1983, p. 3). Davison contended that the tendency to assume that mass communications exert powerful effects on public opinion is a time-honored historical phenomenon; he offered examples from World War II propaganda campaigns and provided evidence from several informal experiments to substantiate his argument.

According to the third-person effect hypothesis, individuals (second persons) typically assume that communications (that are transmitted by first persons) have their greatest influence not on 'me' or on 'you' but on 'them.'--the third persons" (Davison, 1983, p.3). Two different processes were hypothesized to account for this

effect: either individuals are predisposed to minimize the impact that media exert on the self, as psychological studies on perceived invulnerability (Weinstein, 1980) would suggest, or their images or scripts of the "gullible audience" lead them to exaggerate the media's impact on the audience.

Glynn (1985) and Thompson, Oshagan and Chaffee (1986) have obtained evidence that is somewhat consistent with the third-person hypothesis. More direct support for the third person notion has been reported by Mutz (1987), who found that survey respondents believed that media reports about apartheid in South Africa would exert a greater influence on others' attitudes toward divestment than on their own opinions. This discrepancy was highest among respondents who regarded the South Africa issue as highly important. Two experiments have focused on another facet of the third person effect: the notion that individuals may be particularly inclined to attribute powerful--and hostile--effects to mass media when they are ego-involved in the issues that the media are covering. These studies found that pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian partisans perceived that controversial news coverage of the Middle East would cause viewers to become more negative toward their side and more favorable to their antagonists. Perloff also found little evidence that the news coverage actually changed attitudes toward the Middle East and concluded that partisans exaggerated the negative impact that the news would exert on the audience.

These findings have obvious implications for our investigation of the public's opinions about the effects of "Amerika." They provide a theoretical rationale for our predictions about

perceptions of "Amerika." The third person hypothesis suggests that viewers of the maxi-series will assume that the program exerts a greater impact on others than on themselves. Exposure to the massive publicity concerning the series should enhance this effect, although this raises the question of whether the disparity between perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects on others and the self is not itself a "media effect."

In addition, we hypothesized that the third person effect would be magnified when individuals are highly involved in the program. Theory and research on involvement strongly suggests that when individuals are ego-involved in the material that the media are covering, they are inclined to assume that the audience is impressionable and susceptible to media effects. As Perloff (1987) notes, ego involvement may predispose individuals to believe that they alone recognize the sender's intentions; while they understand that media programs are akin to propaganda, third persons, lacking their sophistication, may regard this programming as credible and compelling. Involvement is a complex construct that has been defined and operationalized in different ways. We focused on partisan involvement, choosing two groups that could be classified as highly involved in "Amerika." The first group consisted of peace activists who had closely followed the "Amerika" controversy and who perceived U.S.-Soviet relations to be personally relevant for political reasons. These individuals held highly liberal attitudes and favored closer U.S. relations with the Soviet Union. The second group of involved viewers was a special sample of individuals of Eastern European descent. We expected these

individuals to perceive U.S.-Soviet relations to be personally relevant by virtue of their ancestral connections.

We focused additional attention on the perceptions of these latter individuals, guided by research on cultural identity and communication (Korzenny, Armstrong and Neuendorf, 1979). Our goal was to understand the cognitive processes that mediate the impact that cultural identity exerts on perceptions of culturally-salient media fare. In this investigation, we present the results of preliminary analyses comparing the perceptions of these ethnically-oriented viewers with those of a general sample.

Actual effects: Agenda setting.

The agenda-setting hypothesis (McCombs, 1981) suggests that "Amerika" will exert a minimal effect on attitudes toward U.S.-Soviet relations, but will have major influences on beliefs about what is the most pressing problem facing the United States. According to agenda-setting, viewers of "Amerika" should be more likely to perceive U.S.-Soviet relations as the most important problems facing this country. On the other hand, research by Schuman, Ludwig, and Krosnick (1986) found that an earlier maxi-series, "The Day After," appeared to exert few effects on viewers' ratings of the salience of nuclear war. This study also examined the differential impact of probing agenda-setting through open versus ended questions and found that the format made no difference. We reasoned that the "Amerika" series provided another opportunity to test the agenda-setting hypothesis, as well as the possibility that such agenda-setting effects may depend on the format in which the question is asked.

Method

Samples. Residents of Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Cleveland and its surrounding suburbs) were sampled during and immediately after the "Amerika" broadcast using random digit dialing techniques. The telephone interviews began on February 18, 1987 (the fourth day of the broadcast) and lasted until February 28, five days after the end of the series. Response rate was estimated at 51%.

The additional samples were of Cleveland ethnics, assembled by one of the authors (Jeffres, Barnard and Dobos, 1987) and of liberal activists. The latter was a snowball sample of primarily anti-nuclear peace activists who were contacted by one of the authors at a local comedy club showing of the first episode of the "Amerika" series; other activists were subsequently contacted upon the nomination of their colleagues in the peace group. (All these interviews were conducted over the phone with an initial screening question that asked whether individuals had viewed any of the programs. Only activists who indicated that they had viewed at least one of the programs in the series were interviewed.)

Survey Questions. Agenda-setting was assessed through open and closed ended questions. The open-ended question asked respondents to name the most important problem facing this country today; the closed-ended version asked them to choose the most important problem from a list of other problems (unemployment, government budget cuts, high cost of living, social issues and U.S.-Soviet relations).

A series of questions tapped perceptions of the "Amerika" series. The third person effect was assessed by three pairs of questions, with one question in each pair tapping perceptions of the program's effects on the average person in this country and the other its impact on the respondent. The first of these three questions asked respondents to indicate "how the average person in this country (or the respondent) will feel toward the Soviet Union after watching the TV series." The next questions asked respondents to indicate how the average person (or the respondent) would feel toward Communism and how patriotic they would feel after watching the television series. Order was varied so that half of the time the average person questions were read first and the other half of the time the first questions concerned perceptions of the program's impact on the self. For each question, individuals were asked whether they thought that the average person in this country or they would feel more positive, about the same or more negative toward the criterion (e.g, Communism); if the respondent indicated that they would feel more positive or negative, they were asked to further quantify their feelings by indicating how much more positive or negative on a 10 point scale.

Perceptions were also tapped by three open-ended questions. The first asked individuals to complete this sentence: "I think watching the Amerika series would make the average American think that Soviet citizens are:..." The second question asked respondents to complete this sentence: "Assuming the average Soviet citizen had a chance to watch it, viewing the Amerika series would make them think that Americans are:..." Respondents were also asked to say

what other films or TV shows "Amerika" reminded them of, and why. Demographic variables, and various perceptual and behavioral indicators of ethnicity (Jeffres, Bernard and Dobos, 1987) were also assessed. Attitudes toward the Soviet Union and political ideology were also routinely assessed.

Table 1: Perceptions of "Amerika"'s Effects on Opinions about Soviet Union (Viewers Only)

Questions 8/11: "How do you think the average person in this country (you) will feel toward the Soviet Union after watching the TV series?"

	General sample (n=146)	Ethnic sample (n=36)	Peace activists (n=30)
Average person	-2.5	-1.9	-4.3
Self	- .55	- .50	- .27

1. Scale goes from -10 to 10, where -10 means average person or you will feel more negative toward the Soviet Union, +10 means average person or you will feel more positively toward the Soviet Union and 0 means average person or you has not changed their opinions at all after watching the series.

Summary of Findings. A 2 (group) X 2 (average person versus self) repeated measures analysis of variance was performed. There was a main effect for the within subjects variable (average versus self), $F(1,208)=46.6$, $p<001$, and an interaction between the group and within subjects variable, $F(2,208)=4.9$, $p<01$.

Subsequent tests of the simple main effects revealed that average person scores differed significantly from self scores ($p<.01$) for the general and peace samples, but not for the ethnic sample. In addition, there were significant differences among the three average person scores, but the self scores did not differ significantly among themselves.

Table 2: Perceptions of "Amerika"'s Effects on Opinions about Communism (Viewers Only)

Questions 10/13: "How do you think the average person in this country (you) will feel toward communism after watching the TV series?"

	General sample (n=146)	Ethnic sample (n=36)	Peace activists (n=30)
Average person	-3.6	-4.3	-4.8
Self	-2.1	-2.3	- .03

1. Scale goes from -10 to 10, where -10 means average person or you will feel more negative toward communism, +10 means average person or you will feel more positively toward communism and 0 means average person or you has not changed their opinions at all after watching the series.

Summary of Findings. A 2 (group) X 2 (average person versus self) Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was performed. Once again, although there was no main effect for the between subjects variable, there was a significant within subjects effect, $F(1,206)=42.7$, $p<001$, and an interaction between the group and the within subjects variable (average person versus self), $F(2,206)=5.7$, $p<005$.

When these effects were statistically decomposed, they revealed significant differences on average person versus self scores for all three groups, significant differences among the groups on their scores on both the average person and the self question.

Table 3: Perceptions of "Amerika"'s Effects on Feelings of Patriotism (Viewers Only)

Questions 9/11: "How patriotic do you think the average person in this country (you) will feel toward the U.S. after watching the TV series?"

	General sample (n=145)	Ethnic sample (n=33)	Peace activists (n=29)
Average person	3.2	3.9	3.3
Self	2.4	4.0	-3.8

1. Scale goes from -10 to 10, where -10 means average person of you will feel less patriotic to the U.S., +10 means average person or you will feel more patriotic to the U.S. and 0 means average person or you has not changed their opinions at all after watching the series.

Summary of Findings. A 2 (group) X 2 (average person versus self) Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was performed, yielding a statistically significant effect for the between subjects variable, $F(2,207)=4.75$, $p<01$, a significant effect for the within subjects factor, $F(1,207)=17.24$, $p<001$.

Tests of the simple main effects revealed that the average person and self scores significantly differed for both the general and peace samples, but not the ethnic sample. There were also significant differences among the three average person scores across groups, and self scores also differed significantly across groups.

General Summary and Discussion of Tables 1-3

Third Person Effect. The third person effect hypothesis received strong support from these analyses. In 7 of the 9 tests, there was a significant disparity between perceptions of how "Amerika" would influence the average person in this country and the self. In all cases, the average person was believed to be more susceptible to influence. Thus, compared to themselves, respondents believed that the average person would become more negative to the Soviet Union and communism and would feel more patriotic to the U.S. after watching the series.

Group Differences. Peace activists tended to exhibit the largest disparities between perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects on the average person versus self. In contrast, the disparity between perceptions of "Amerika"'s effects on the average person rather than the self were smallest among the ethnic sample. Thus, ethnics did not perceive that the average person would become more negative to the Soviet Union or more patriotic to the U.S. than would they.

It appears as if peace activists tended to contrast their own views from those of the average American, while ethnic respondents tended to assimilate their views to those of the average person. Additional analyses need to be performed to better understand these differences. We need to know whether activists' tendency to magnify third person effects is due to their educational level (most had at least a college degree) or to their partisanship (i.e., their involvement and liberal political ideologies). In the same fashion, we need to know why ethnic respondents tended to perceive that "Amerika" would not exert significantly greater effects on the average person than on the self in the case of opinions about the Soviet Union and feelings of patriotism. Additional analyses will need to probe how education, ideology and ethnic identification (with anti-Soviet countries) may explain these effects.

Accuracy. Were respondents exaggerating the impact that the program would exert on others, or were they minimizing the effect that it would exert on themselves? It is possible that the program exerted highly subtle effects, effects that eluded conscious awareness. We are inclined to doubt it, though. Although we acknowledge that respondents may not wish to acknowledge that a maxi-series influences them, our agenda setting data suggest that the series in fact exerted few actual effects on salience ratings.

Instead, for a variety of reasons, ranging from the media "hype" of the series to the "audience effects scripts" individuals carry in their heads, our respondents perceived that this fictional depiction of life in America would leave a more lasting impression on the average person than on themselves--a perception that appears to have a questionable basis in reality (see also LaSorsa, 1987).

Table 4: Questionnaire Form and U.S.-Soviet Relations,
Controlling for Media Exposure

Non-viewers	Closed-ended (n=126)	Open-ended (n=90)
U.S.-Soviet relations	13.5%	21.1%
All other problems	86.5	78.9
Chi-square=2.194, n.s.		
Viewers	Closed-ended (n=74)	Open-ended (n=80)
U.S.-Soviet relations	14.9%	16.3%
All other problems	85.1	83.8
Chi-square=0.056, n.s.		

Summary of Findings. All other problems include the following: the high cost of living, unemployment, government budget cuts, social issues, complacency and miscellaneous.

The Chi-square test indicates that the questionnaire forms--open-ended versus closed-ended--did not have a significant impact on the perceived importance of U.S.-Soviet relations. The two forms appeared to lead to the same conclusions. The results are consistent with the findings of Schuman, et al.

Table 5: Media Exposure and U.S.-Soviet Relations, Controlling for Questionnaire Form

Closed-ended	Non-viewers (n=126)	Viewers (n=74)
U.S.-Soviet relations	13.5%	14.9%
All other problems	86.5	85.1
Chi-square=0.073, n.s.		
Open-ended	Non-viewers (n=90)	Viewers (n=80)
U.S.-Soviet relations	21.1%	16.3%
All other problems	78.9	83.8
Chi-square=0.062, n.s.		

Summary of Findings. All other problems include the following: the high cost of living, unemployment, government budget cuts, social issues, complacency and miscellaneous.

The Chi-square test suggests that watching "Amerika" did not lead the viewers to perceive U.S.-Soviet relations as the most important problem facing this country. The results are consistent with the findings of Schuman, et al.

Table 6: Questionnaire Form and Agenda-setting, Controlling for Media Exposure

Non-viewers	Closed-ended (n=126)	Open-ended (n=90)
The high cost of living	23.0%	13.3%
Unemployment	25.4	24.4
U.S.-Soviet relations	13.5	21.1
Government budget cuts	15.9	4.4
Social issues	14.3	12.2
Complacency	0.0	1.1
Miscellaneous	7.9	23.3
Chi-square=20.85, p<.001		
Viewers	Closed-ended (n=74)	Open-ended (n=80)
The high cost of living	18.9%	13.8%
Unemployment	20.3	10.0
U.S.-Soviet relations	14.9	16.3
Government budget cuts	25.7	13.8
Social issues	6.8	11.3
Complacency	1.4	10.0
Miscellaneous	12.2	25.0
Chi-square=15.34, p<.05		

Summary of Findings. The Chi-square test indicates that the questionnaire forms appeared to have an impact on the perceived importance of the following problems: the high cost of living, unemployment, government budget cuts and social issues. On the closed form, these issues were most frequently chosen as the "most important." It seems that the questionnaire form had an agenda-setting effect.

Table 7: Watching Amerika and Agenda-setting, Controlling for Questionnaire Form

Closed-ended	Non-viewers (n=126)	Viewers (n=74)
The high cost of living	23.0%	18.9%
Unemployment	25.4	20.3
U.S.-Soviet relations	13.5	14.9
Government budget cuts	15.9	25.7
Social issues	14.3	6.8
Complacency	0.0	1.4
Miscellaneous	7.9	12.2
Chi-square=6.12, n.s.		
Open-ended	Non-viewers (n=90)	Viewers (n=80)
The high cost of living	13.3%	13.8%
Unemployment	24.4	10.0
U.S.-Soviet relations	21.1	16.3
Government budget cuts	4.4	13.8
Social issues	12.2	11.3
Complacency	1.1	10.0
Miscellaneous	23.3	25.0
Chi-square=16.10, p<.01		

Summary of Findings. The results in this table are not that clear-cut. After controlling for the questionnaire form, it seems that watching "Amerika" did not have an apparent agenda-setting effect.

Table 8: Comparison of Eastern European Ethnics & Other Respondents on Third Person Effects

	Third Person Effects on Attitudes toward Soviet Union		Third Person Effects on Patriotism		Third Person Effects on Attitudes toward Communism	
	<u>Eastern Europeans</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Eastern Europeans</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Eastern Europeans</u>	<u>Others</u>
Greater positive impact on others than on self	22%	14%	36%	33%	17%	21%
No difference in impact seen	22	41	54	39	49	37
Greater positive impact on self than others	55	44	12	28	34	41
(N) 100%=	(40)	(133)	(41)	(132)	(41)	(131)

Summary of Findings. Of the 191 "Amerika" viewers, 44 were Eastern European ethnics. These were compared with other respondents to look at potential "cultural" links to the series. Just as political involvement was expected to affect audience assessments, cultural links were expected to draw viewers to the series and similarly affect their participation. In the table above and in following tables Eastern European ethnics and other respondents are compared on "third person effects" and other variables.

Table 9: Sources of Information about Soviet Union and other Communicatin Variables for Ethnics, Others

	<u>Eastern Europeans</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>Chi Squared</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Books	20%	14%	.56	n.s.
Television	41	62	5.26	p<.05
Newspapers	52	67	2.71	.10<p<.05
Radio	14	13	.00	n.s.
Magazines	25	29	.07	n.s.
Letters abroad	7	1	2.10	n.s.
Personal contacts	16	13	.06	n.s.
Travel to E. Europe	9	3	.01	n.s.
Hours spent watching TV	2.66	2.54	.30	n.s.
Attention to mass media	2.70	2.52	1.09	n.s.

Summary of Findings. Respondents were asked where they got information on the Soviet Union. Following is a breakdown of responses by source, plus comparisons on the amount of time spent watching TV; as the data indicate, Eastern European ethnics relied less on TV and newspapers than does the general public for information about the Soviet Union:

Table 10: Comparisons of Eastern European Ethnics & Others on Viewing "Amerika," Attitudes, Assessments of Impact

	<u>Eastern Europeans</u>	<u>Others</u>	<u>F =</u>	<u>Significance</u>
No. of episodes viewed	4.76	3.57	10.05	p<.01
Interest in series	5.33	5.39	.01	n.s.
How realistic series was viewed	4.14	3.76	.66	n.s.
How you feel toward Soviet Union	-.45	-.44	.00	n.s.
How others feel toward Soviet Union	-2.68	-2.24	.30	n.s.
How patriotic you are	2.83	2.64	.07	n.s.
How patriotic others are	3.79	3.30	.49	n.s.
How you feel toward communism	-3.48	-1.80	4.50	p<.05
How others feel toward communism	-4.52	-3.69	1.12	n.s.
Interest in going to the Soviet Union	7.40	6.40	5.14	p<.03
How interested others are in visiting USSR	4.95	5.04	.04	n.s.
Your political stand (low=conservative)	2.60	2.95	3.27	p<.07
Soviet threat to U.S. (low=no threat)	3.23	3.06	1.26	n.s.
(N)	(44)	(141)		

Summary of Findings. The two groups were also compared on their viewing of "Amerika," their assessments of the series' impact, and their political views: As the table shows, Eastern European ethnics watched more episodes but didn't describe themselves as more interested in the series. They also are more negative towards communism and perceive others as more negative than do other respondents. Ethnics also are more interested in visiting the Soviet Union. The ethnics describe themselves as more conservative than do other respondents.

Table 11: Relationships Between Third Person Effects
and Communication Variables for Eastern European Ethnics

Third Person Effects in Attitudes toward:

	<u>Soviet Union</u>	<u>Patriotism</u>	<u>Communism</u>
Ethnic interpersonal com.	-.10	-.15	-.20#
Ethnic media use	-.04	.12	-.11
How often talk to other ethnic groups	-.14	.08	.16
Has traveled to communist countries	-.22#	.07	-.08
Has relatives/friends living in communist countries	-.27*	-.04	-.07
Attention to mass media	-.14	.08	.16
Uses following sources for information about USSR:			
books	.13	-.12	-.29*
television	-.24#	.10	-.25*
newspapers	.16	.11	.09
radio	-.13	.32*	-.32*
magazines	.15	.01	.07
letters abroad	-.34*	-.07	-.18
personal contacts	-.13	-.16	.07
travel to E.Eur./USSR	-.11	.14	-.17
Third Person Effects:			
Communism	.41*	-.13	
Patriotism	.16		

* = $p < .05$ or less often; # = $.10 < p < .05$

Summary of Findings. The above represent product moment correlations for the 44 Eastern European ethnics who watched the "Amerika" series. A negative correlation means that, for example, those who use particular sources or were high on ethnic communication variables were high on Third Person Effects (i.e., saw greater positive effects on others than on self). Correlations between the three Third Person Effects scores show a relationship between assessments of impact on attitudes towards communism and the Soviet Union, but attitudes towards patriotism are not related to the other two.

Table 12: Inferences of National Imaging from "Amerika" Content

	Nonrelevant ethnics (n=35)	Relevant ethnics (n=44)	General sample (n=123)
Question 3:			
"I'd like you to complete the following sentence for me: 'I think watching the Amerika series would make the average American think that Soviet citizens are:'"			
0=Unable to answer	31.4%	9.1%	15.4%
1=Same as we are	11.4	25.0	18.7
2=Oppressed	2.9	20.5	20.3
3=Cruel (aggressive/ bad)	37.1	22.7	27.6
4=Stupid (foolish/ disagreeable)	5.7	11.4	6.5
5=Good (nice/fair)	2.9	6.8	4.1
6=Other	8.6	4.5	7.3
Question 4:			
"Now this sentence: 'Assuming the average Soviet citizen had a chance to watch it, viewing the Amerika series would make them think that Americans are:'"			
0=Unable to answer	31.4	13.6	13.0
1=Same as they are	2.9	11.4	7.3
2=Weak (gullible/ oppressed)	20.0	27.3	31.7
3=Aggressive (bad)	5.7	6.8	5.7
4=Stupid (foolish)	5.7	9.1	11.4
5=Good (fair/ intelligent)	5.7	4.5	4.9
6=Rebellious (brave/ freedom conscious)	8.6	13.6	8.9
7=Anti-Russian (paranoid)	5.7	0.0	8.1
8=Arrogant	5.7	2.3	3.3
9=Other	8.6	11.4	5.7

Summary of Findings. Two questionnaire items asked respondents to infer the type of national image a viewer of "Amerika" would construct, using open-ended questions with subsequent coding into the categories shown above.

Although small cell sizes prohibited a test of statistical significance (e.g., via Chi-square analysis), we observed interesting differences among three sample groups--"nonrelevant ethnics," those in the ethnic sample not of Russian or Eastern European origin; "relevant ethnics," those of Russian or Eastern European heritage; and the "general sample" of all others. In terms of American impressions of Soviets, the relevant ethnic group was most likely to give a qualitative assessment (only 9.1% were unable to answer) and were more likely to infer impressions of stupidity or foolishness. In terms of Soviet impressions of Americans, relevant ethnics were also unlikely to be at a loss for comments (only 13.6% were unable to answer) and were more likely to give assorted "other" responses. Across both questions, relevant ethnics were most likely to infer impressions of cross-cultural similarity (i.e., "same as we/they are").

Goodman + Kruskal's tau b (τ_b)

Asymmetric lambda (λ_a, λ_b)

Cramer's V

Symmetric lambda (λ_{AB})

Contingency coefficient (κ)

Table 13: Comparative Media Framing

	Total (all samples)	Nonrelevant ethnics	Relevant ethnics	General sample
Question 7c: "What other films or TV shows does 'Amerika' remind you of?"				
Percent naming a comparative program/movie	33.2% (n=69 men- tions)	26.3% (n=10 mentions)	25.6% (n=11 men- tions)	37.8% (n=48 men- tions)
<u>Theme</u>				
Rebel	49.3	50.0	54.5	47.9
Soviet	40.6	50.0	36.4	39.6
Russian	42.0	50.0	36.4	41.7
Totalitarian	49.3	60.0	45.5	47.9
Invasion	31.9	20.0	18.2	37.5
War	58.0	70.0	45.5	58.3
Nazi	10.1	20.0	0.0	10.4
<u>Format</u>				
Mini-series	13.0	30.0	0.0	12.5
Theatrical movie	47.8	40.0	27.3	54.2
TV movie	14.5	10.0	18.2	14.6
Other TV	14.5	10.0	45.5	8.3
Other	10.1	10.0	9.1	10.4
<u>Historical basis</u> (historical events serve as motor for plot or central context)	29.0	50.0	27.3	25.0
<u>Time setting</u>				
Past society	29.0	10.0	27.3	25.0
Present society	58.0	50.0	63.6	60.4
Future society	8.7	40.0	9.1	10.4
<u>Family relationships</u> (relationships among family members of different generations are central to the plot)	42.0	70.0	54.5	33.3

<u>Persuasive content</u> (content itself is transparently persuasive)	5.8	0.0	0.0	8.3
<u>Geographic setting</u>				
"Heartland"-- rural U.S.	47.1	30.0	27.3	55.3
Urban U.S.	13.2	20.0	27.3	8.5
Rural foreign	4.4	10.0	9.1	2.1
Urban foreign	13.2	10.0	18.2	12.8
Other/many	22.1	30.0	18.2	21.3

Summary of Findings. Sixty-nine different mentions were itemized in response to the question, "What other films or TV shows does 'Amerika' remind you of?" (Due to this small number of responses, the total sample results are presented, as are those broken down by sample group.) These open-ended responses were coded in a variety of ways: As to the presence or absence of seven non-mutually exclusive themes, type of format, whether there was historical basis for the content, the time setting, centrality of cross-generational family relationships, the persuasive intent of the content and the geographic setting. These codings were emergent from the data themselves, thus giving us insight into the bases upon which comparative media judgments are made. Surprisingly, few differences across sample groups emerged; one notable exception is that of references to comparative media events set in the "heartland" of rural America --the general sample was much more likely to pick up on this "Amerika" theme for comparative purposes than were ethnic samples. It is clear from these findings that there is no uniformity in respondents' bases for comparisons--i.e., not all named another mini-series, or even another program about Soviet Russia (see the table that follows for an itemization of all responses). These intriguing differences serve as a basis for the textual analysis to follow.

Table 14: Response Frequencies to Comparative Media Question

129	None (no; no answer; cannot answer)
12	"Red Dawn"
9	"The Day After" ("The Morning After")
4	"1984"
3	"Roots"
3	Soap operas ("Dallas")
2	German propaganda films
2	"V"
2	"Rocky IV"
2	"Dr. Zhivago"
1	"Invasion U.S.A."
1	"The Winds of War"
1	"What a Country"
1	"The North and the South"
1	"Rambo"
1	Bugs Bunny (satire)
1	"Holocaust"
1	"Grease"
1	"Hiroshima"
1	"We the Living" (book)
1	Nazi war movies
1	TV violence
1	"Rebels"
1	"World at War"
1	Anne Frank's diary
1	Other mini-series
1	Soap box
1	"Soylent Green"
1	"Invaders from Outer Space" ("Invasion from Mars")
1	"Z"
1	Westerns
1	"Fahrenheit 451"
1	"War of the Worlds"
1	Science fiction
1	"Call to Glory"
1	"Fiddler on the Roof"
1	School films that had to be watched

SOME QUESTIONS OF RECEPTION

by Dennis Giles

On the special edition of Nightline which discussed the political implications of Amerika, the terms of the debate assumed that the miniseries would and should be read as a text about "reality"--as a projection of current U.S-Soviet politics or, as a text which--although fictional--operates within and impacts upon the "real" political relations between these two countries. Did viewers actually read this miniseries in terms of a non-fiction reality, and/or did they experience it as relating to other fiction? The awkwardly phrased question in our survey, "What other films or TV shows did Amerika remind you of?" was asked in order to gauge the extent to which viewers associated this mini-series with other texts in the domain of screened fiction.

Only one third of the viewers in the total sample identified other titles or types of screened texts. This somewhat surprising lack of intertextual association could mean that viewers believed this particular text to be quite "unique"--alone of its kind; or it could stem from our tactical error in burying this query among a chain of questions which asked viewers to treat Amerika in terms of "real" off-screen politics, thus requiring a sudden mental shift on the part of our respondents outside the context of the questionnaire as a whole. The responses we did receive to the question, however, bear some interesting implications for reception theory.

Although Amerika was heavily promoted as a "special television event," those viewers who said that the text reminded them of another screened text identified films made for theatrical release more often than made-for-television texts. Only 13% of the respondents mentioned other TV miniseries. The response to this question may indicate that films made for theatrical release (regardless of whether they were viewed in theatres or on television) still carry more cultural "authority"--and are certainly more often remembered--than made-for-television fare. The theatrical film Red Dawn, for example, was mentioned more often than the most frequently cited TV production, The Day After, despite the fact that the television "event" was witnessed by a considerably greater number of viewers than attended Red Dawn.

None of the viewers were explicitly reminded of any other film or television production featuring the major actors of Amerika, despite the fact that Kris Kristofferson (a sometimes film star) and Robert Urich (a television series star) played two of the three major male roles in the miniseries. This suggests that the "star" status of these actors is so weak that their presence on screen carries no "residual" from previous roles, and/or the "special event" status of this miniseries was so strong as to effectively annul whatever residual characterization viewers may have associated with these stars.

At this point a clarification of terms is in order. There were three types of metatextual material associated with Amerika. Metatext is here simply defined as televised discourse "about" the

narrative text of the miniseries, which refers back to the "body" of the narrative text, but is placed outside the narrative proper. In the case of Amerika, one type of metatext was televised discussion concerning the "meaning" and political implications of the miniseries--most notably the extended debate on a "Special Edition" of Nightline. A second type: the televised messages by ABC promoting the miniseries. A third type was the material directly appended to the text itself which introduced the narrative, summarized it, promised future scenes of the drama, etc. This type of metatext included the pre-title and title sequences of the first day, plus "framing" images which opened and closed most 20 minute segments of the narrative--these images drawn directly from the body of the narrative, serving as transitions from text to commercials and from commercials to text. This third--appended or "imbedded"--type of metatext functioned as signs which, in the words of Gerald Prince (1982) "help specify the assumptions of the text and the decoding contracts endorsed by it. In other words, they clarify the premises of textual communicability . . ." Prince calls them "metanarrative signs" (p.127). Although the metatextual material promoting and or discussing Amerika prior to--and during--the week of its screening largely treated the event as a futuristic fiction "about" Soviet-American politics or even as commentary upon actual Soviet-American relations, less than half of the viewers in our sample who were reminded of another film or TV show mentioned texts which Soviet or Russian themes or characters were important to the plot. Moreover, only half (49%) of the respondents to the question were reminded of other texts involving a

struggle against oppressive or totalitarian political regimes. The responses suggest that the assumption shared by 1) political and media commentators, 2) the "Special Edition" of Nightline, and 3) our Cleveland State questionnaire that this was indeed a political text primarily meaningful in terms of Soviet-American power politics was NOT shared by a significant percentage of viewers. Whatever the intentions guiding the text, and despite the degree to which first two types of metatextual material tried to focus viewer attention on the political dimension of Amerika, many viewers chose to interpret the drama in a manner distinct from this dominant "institutional" or "official" reading.

Responses indicated that the "setting"--the fictional location--of the miniseries evoked textual associations not necessarily related to a political theme. The rural landscape, the small town of Milford, Nebraska, and the use of the family farm as the arena for much of the action evidently awakened associations involving a whole cultural region of "Heartland" texts, as we call them, ranging from the American Midwest to the rustic rural Russian setting of Fiddler on the Roof. It is noteworthy that the two titles most often mentioned, Red Dawn and The Day After were firmly placed in this rural "Heartland" region. A second element common to many of the titles mentioned by viewers was the emphasis on family relationships as a central concern of the associated texts.

The first three shots of the pre-title sequence which opened the first night of the miniseries display helicopters swooping in attack formation over plowed winter fields towards, then over, a farmhouse,

as its residents run out of the house in alarm. The helicopters fly towards the camera, seeming to directly attack the off-screen spectator, thus visually and psychologically "positioning" the viewer as sharing the farmers' site, their situation and, to an extent, their identity. The next three shots--composing the second scene of the sequence--summarize a family drama in which an angry old man (the father) ends a denunciation of the star, Kristofferson, by blaming him with the bitter words, "You lost the land]]" Twelve short scenes later, the pre-title sequence concludes with the image of farmers and townspeople waving American flags and cheering defiantly atop a grain elevator. Throughout the week of the miniseries this last image, mixing patriotism with rural rebellion, begins or concludes segments of the text, usually paired with the Amerika logo--the receding word "Amerika" superimposed over a waving American flag. The title sequence itself begins with a series of shots of vacant winter fields, rural roads and farmhouses, under dark, threatening clouds, again emphatically, repetitively, "placing" the viewer in the "Heartland" during the "dead season." Thus this metatextual material which frames the textual segments, reducing or distilling the whole narrative into a series of "essential" images of the text, intertwines the "large," political theme with the "small" drama of generational conflict within a farming family, with fertile but temporarily dead Heartland landscapes, with the theme of the loss or destruction of the family farm, and with images of rural rebellion (which may, for many viewers, evoke memories of "farm crisis" news stories, "Farm Aid" concerts, etc.).

These intermingled, entangled themes and images are shown not only in the appended (type 3) metatext, but are woven throughout the narrative itself through the structuring device of the national and international political struggles being fought within the microcosm of family conflict. When viewers, therefore, identify Amerika with rural "Heartland" texts and family dramas which may or may NOT involve international power politics or struggles against a totalitarian state, they are, I would argue, only following the lead of important scenes and images summarized from the text by the metatext. Moreover, they are following the guidance of major sequences of the text itself. Given the heterogeneity of the Amerika text, which I have tried to demonstrate briefly above, it is hardly surprising that some viewers seem to have chosen to focus on the "smaller," more familiar and "traditional" elements of the text rather than attempting to negotiate the international political drama which "official," "institutional" commentary stressed as the unique and important dimension of the miniseries. This finding tends to parallel Morley's (1980) conclusion that viewers often emphasize and interpret one "layer" of a news narrative while ignoring others, and supports Newcomb's (1984) stress on the multivocal nature of television texts and the unpredictability of viewer responses. It also supports Fiske's (1986) discussion of the ability of viewers to read a polysemic texts in ways which evade or resist the interpretation that is culturally "preferred" or "dominant."

A final point concerning the implications of Amerika for reception theory: A televised text as lengthy as Amerika should, in

theory, encourage a greater range of responses, tend to maximize the viewers' "freedom" to interpret, and minimize the producers' control over how a heterogeneous text is actually received. According to an ABC Social Research Unit study, 45% of Amerika viewers watched only one or two nights of the program, while only one-fifth of all viewers watched all seven nights. Given the length of the miniseries, it is doubtful that even those viewers who watched the whole text devoted equal attention to all the textual moments. The unified, cohesive text which was produced and broadcast by ABC was rarely the text actually seen and heard by viewers. Most response and interpretation was, almost necessarily, based on a partial text, a text with gaps-- a gaping text --tending towards

"incoherence" in both the strict and figurative sense of the term. But, almost paradoxically, the very incoherence of the Amerika text may have increased the producers' control over the "reading" of that text by some viewers in that it increased the viewers' dependence on the metatextual material as a map to the miniseries--a means of finding one's "place" within it. This metatextual material probably served, in such a lengthy media event, more as a sometimes indispensable guide to viewer memory and interpretation. Yet, as I have suggested above, the third, appended (embedded) type of metatext itself displayed a variety of themes, and engaged a variety of cultural resonances from other texts which may have weakened the overall strength of the "official" political theme so stressed by institutional commentators in other metatexts. Those who stressed a purely political reading in the Nightline metatext ignored other layers of the narrative to which viewers were responding. I am

forced to conclude that almost no-one read the "whole" text, that every reading was partial.

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