

USC/U.S. State Department's "American Film Showcase"

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Aim: To project an image of the United States through the lenses of independent American filmmakers, offering alternatives to the image projected in commercial exports, such as Hollywood films and television shows.

Scenario: When the Showcase debuted in 2012, the legacy of George W. Bush's presidency was still fresh, with its record lows in public opinion of the U.S. (per the Pew Global Attitudes Research Project) and all the perception of U.S. cultural and military imperialism that it engendered, or at least exacerbated. U.S. commercial entertainment exports often supported—and still support—these perceptions by projecting an image of excess, mindless consumption, and violence, or, just as often, a wilfully childish focus on escapism (in 2010, *Toy Story 3* and *Iron Man 2* were among the highest-grossing films internationally. In 2011, that list included *Transformers: Dark of the Moon*, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, and *The Hangover Part 2*). In addition, the Bush legacy compounded a historical PD issue the U.S. has grappled with for decades, if not a century: a well-deserved reputation for failing to honestly confront its own civil and human rights shortcomings, while condemning and occasionally intervening in what it deemed unacceptable human rights violations by other countries—in short, hypocrisy.

Program Activity: Launched in 2012, while Hillary Clinton was U.S. Secretary of State, the American Film Showcase's tagline "Boosting People-to-People Engagement Through Film" exemplifies Clinton's relatively creative approach to public diplomacy and her willingness to invest in what a February, 2012 State Department press release called her vision of "embrace[ing] the use of a full range of diplomatic tools—in this case film—to bring people together and foster greater understanding." The American Film Showcase spoke to the need to broaden global understanding of the existence of a multicultural America, one in which citizens resist their government, acknowledge the existence of suffering, experience poverty as well as plenty, and stand for peace—that is, an America in which citizens possess a social conscience.

A collaboration between the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, the Showcase sends a team comprised of one "film expert," one independent filmmaker, and one staff member to hold screenings and filmmaking workshops in conjunction with local American embassies (who do the legwork of finding local workshop participants) across the world. Representatives also meet with local filmmakers, film festival officials, film students and professors, and personnel from local film-related nonprofits, establishing relationships and implementing a key "listening"/exchange component in the Showcase's PD mission. The program has a broad geographical reach, which in its first year included 21 countries in the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

The presence in the original pool of filmmakers of the late Les Blank, who chronicled regional music in films such as *The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins* (1968) and *Cigarette Blues* (1985), experimental New York-based filmmaker Alan Berliner, and civil rights-focused documentarian Stanley Nelson indicated a real understanding and commitment to including truly independent voices in the showcase. According to USC Professor and Showcase participant Mark Jonathan Harris, the documentaries selected for

screening are intended to reflect the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' focus on youth empowerment, female empowerment, and a diverse civil society. The inclusion of films critical of corporate America and particularly environmentally-conscious films, such as *Gasland* (dir. Josh Fox, 2010) and *Food Inc.* (dir. Robert Kenner, 2008), show a heartening reversal from United States Information Agency's notorious unwillingness in the 1980s to show documentaries of that nature under the educational film exchange program known as the Beirut Agreement. *The Interrupters* (dir. Steve James, 2011), about gang violence in Chicago, and *Calavera Highway* (dir. Renee Tajima-Pena, 2008), about Mexican-American families struggling with the legacy of the 1954 deportation program "Operation Wetback," also demonstrate an openness to projecting self-critique in the Showcase.

Though current Secretary of State John Kerry is known for a more traditional approach to diplomacy than his predecessor, the Showcase is now in its third year and appears to be going strong.

Analysis: Perhaps because it is so new, metrics for the Showcase are hard to come by, making an objective analysis of the project's success or lack thereof difficult. But the self-reported evaluations available in news stories and on the Showcase blog are promising: in 2013, an unnamed State Department official told *Documentary* magazine that "the program met its goals of promoting mutual understanding and basically supporting U.S. foreign policy goals by reaching new and important audiences," though he fails to specify what those goals were. Blog entries, comprised mostly of firsthand accounts from Showcase envoys of their trips abroad, generally conclude that the missions were positive educational exchanges for all involved. Still, there is no telling as yet whether the Showcase has successfully "moved the needle" in projecting a more equitable, diverse, less hypocritical U.S. abroad, or whether the Showcase's envoys are making meaningful headway in exporting a non-commercial film culture to foreign audiences.

There is cause for optimism in the State Department's willingness to screen critiques in the vein of *Food, Inc.* as a part of the Showcase, which is a departure from the USIA's censorious agenda in decades past. However, as former USIA agent Michael Canning remarked in 2012, the majority of the featured documentaries in the Showcase's first year "offer benign and positive outlooks on the American experience, and many of them feature youngsters overcoming tough odds, in sports, class, and life." In this sense, the Showcase may not yet have achieved a healthy balance between critical and favorable projections of the U.S. through film diplomacy.

Learning Points: The American Film Showcase, if successful, demonstrates the value of independent documentary film as a medium for educational exchange, and for exporting non-commercial U.S. culture

Key Sources: The project's website, americanfilmshowcase.usc.edu, is by far the richest source of information on the Showcase, including a frequently updated blog and links to news articles on the project. Aside from a 2013 feature article in *Documentary* magazine and a 2012 blog post at publicdiplomacycouncil.org from former USIA agent Michael Canning, little has yet been written on the Showcase from a PD perspective.