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Cinematic diplomacy: USC and State Department collaborate

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Americans are a slender people with blindingly white teeth who spend their days dodging explosions and fending off alien invasions. At least that's the view citizens of many parts of the globe might have, if their only experience with American culture were big-budget Hollywood movies.

The [U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs](#) is partnering with the [University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts](#) in an effort to deploy America's chief artistic export in a broader way however.

The State Department has awarded USC a \$1-million grant to help administer the American Film Showcase, a program that seeks to use movies as a means to foster greater cultural understanding. Begun three years ago as part of what Secretary of State Hillary Rodham

Clinton has called "smart power diplomacy," the program will expand in 2012 from documentaries to include narrative films as well.

"Films are a means of spurring conversations about topical issues of common concern between people in the United States and those outside the United States," said Marjorie Ames, division chief of cultural programs at the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. "It's a compelling visual medium. The history of American filmmaking is strong and rich and includes a wide range of different voices ... independent filmmakers in addition to commercial filmmakers. We think having the stories of contemporary life in the U.S. shown through these different perspectives is a tremendously powerful way to communicate things about our country."

A panel of 25 filmmakers and experts, including Michael Apter ("7 Up," "The Chronicles of Narnia"), Rob Epstein ("The Times of Harvey Milk"), Marco Williams ("In Search of Our Fathers") and Mary Sweeney (editor, "Mulholland Drive"), will help select 35 films to recommend to U.S. embassies for screening abroad. The [International Documentary Assn.](#) and [Film Independent](#), the nonprofit group that produces the Spirit Awards and the Los Angeles Film Festival, are also partners in the endeavor.

In addition to screening the films, filmmakers and experts will travel to conduct lectures on such topics as filmmaking, animation, digital technology and emergent media.

In choosing which films to exhibit, the State Department will establish themes of interest, such as the environment, civil discourse, empowerment of women and girls and health issues, Ames said.

"A film does not necessarily have to be favorable to the U.S.," said Alan Baker, associate dean of administration and international projects at USC's School of Cinematic Arts. "It should illustrate the freedom of thought that's available in the U.S."

The State Department's 2011 program includes documentaries that depict a wide spectrum of American life, from an illustration of the 1st Amendment ("The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers") to a portrait of two women with disabilities ("Body & Soul: Diana & Kathy") to a biography of an American rock star, "It's About You: John Mellencamp." Films were screened in China, India, Russia and various African and Latin American countries.

"The idea is to try to bring films that ordinarily are not seen by these countries," said Mark Harris, an Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker and professor at USC who is one of the principal investigators on the project. "These are not Hollywood blockbusters. These are documentaries or independent films that don't get distribution in foreign countries. It's a way of conveying American democratic values, to represent the diversity of our country, the openness of debate."

The State Department will announce its 2012 slate of showcase films in February.