

Assignment for a communication class using media theories at the University of Denver.

The Globalization of Film:

An In-depth Look at Hollywood and China

In April 2017, director Guillermo del Toro announced that he would direct a sequel to the domestic box office flop *Pacific Rim*. This announcement surprised many United States critics due to the original film's failure at the US box office. US ratings were horrible, earning only \$101 million in domestic ticket sales on a \$190 million budget—for a \$90 million loss—and many critics rated it as one of the year's worst films (Mendelson, 2017). However, though the movie flopped at the domestic box office, it performed much better in foreign markets, making over \$413 million worldwide—\$113 million of that coming just from China (Mendelson, 2017). The international success of one of the year's worst movies highlights how globalization has changed the dynamics of the production of major films. With the growing appeal of global markets, Hollywood has transnationalized blockbuster films, de-culturating them in order to appeal to those global audiences. China, seeing this as a way to perform better in the free market and as a way to gain soft power, has begun to do the same. This paper will look in-depth at the influence Hollywood has placed on international film markets like China and, in concert, the influence of international culture on Hollywood.

Relevant Theories

As globalization has evolved, many scholars have attempted to explain this international phenomenon. Some see the increasingly interconnection of the world as a positive while others claim that globalization is overwhelmingly problematic. The theories these scholars have produced are useful tools for explaining globalization and how the process has impacted the global film industry, thus a brief explanation of these theories is required.

What is globalization? Heinz Bude and Jorg Durrschmidt offer the definition “Globalization is about growing mobility across frontiers—mobility of goods and commodities, mobility of information and communication products and services, and mobility of people” (Bude & Durrschmidt, 2010, p. 484). Jack Lule (2015), in his book Globalization and Media: Global Village of Babel, says “globalization is defined as a set of multiple, uneven, and sometimes overlapping historical processes, including economics, politics, and culture, that have combined with the evolution of media technology to create the conditions under which the globe itself can now be understood as ‘an imagined community’” (p. 31). Summarized, globalization refers to the processes of movement that the advances of modern technology have provided. The movement of people, goods, ideas, and information are all a part of globalization.

Cultural imperialism

As a critical critique of globalization, cultural imperialism suggests that these global processes of movement damage culture at the expense of profit. It can be defined as “the exalting and spreading of values and habits—a practice in which economic power plays an instrumental role” (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 3). In the context of Hollywood, the cultural imperialism viewpoint would argue that the United States—through its economic power and capitalist market—forces

its ideas and values onto other nations through film, resulting in the destruction of native cultures and ways of thinking. “For what is claimed is that a form of domination exists in the modern world, not just in the political and economic spheres but also over those practices by which collectivities make sense of their lives” (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 7). In other words, Hollywood and the capitalist market is a “homogenizing cultural force” (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 26).

Audience Reception Theory

The audience reception theory refutes the notion that certain cultures can simply dominate others. This theory emphasizes an “active audience” who participate in the decoding of messages and have the ability to think and choose for themselves what they want and what they don’t want (Mody & Lee, 2003). Adherents of this theory believe viewers are not victims of an evil, culture-destroying agency but rather active participants making positive changes in their communities. They argue that critics must explore the context of a situation before jumping to conclusions about undue influence by the film industry (Mody & Lee, 2003).

Soft power

Joseph Nye (2008), when discussing the topic of public diplomacy, produces a third theory called soft power. He writes, “power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want” (Nye, 2008, p.94) and he differentiates between two types of power: hard power and soft power. He says that hard power is coercive—either threatening with military or economic force—and that soft power is persuasive power (Nye, 2008). Nye adds that soft power is not just about persuasion, but it also “has the ability to entice and attract” (p. 95). In these terms,

Hollywood can be seen as a form of soft power as it spreads around the world, enticing and attracting all who view its films.

Before discussing these theories further in the context of Hollywood, and how it relates to China, a review of the history and current state of these two institutions is in order.

Literature Review

The Rise of Hollywood

The American film industry flourished during the first and second world wars. A strong national pride and unity seemed to permeate every aspect of economic activity, including the American film industry (Wasser, 1995). Because of this, Hollywood had a built-in audience for its films. If Hollywood made a movie, people would come to see it. This changed through the 50s and 60s as the wars became memories, and—perhaps more importantly—the rise in popularity of television sets provided Americans an option to stay in their own homes for entertainment (Wasser, 1995). The film industry recognized that the built-in audience it had taken for granted began to disappear, and the industry recognized a need to advertise to different markets, and not a nation (Wasser, 1995).

Transnational Film: The Blockbuster

As film budgets rose, the necessity to appeal to larger markets rose as well. As the speed of globalization increased, Hollywood saw an opportunity to expand its markets even further by creating blockbusters that would appeal to all nationalities (Wasser, 1995). In response to this opportunity, Hollywood created the blockbuster, a film that has enormous production costs but is

created for a vast global audience. Hollywood has taken two directions to increase its international appeal, allowing it to thrive both in the United States and abroad.

The first change was the shuffle and utilization of foreign resources. Hollywood realized that the large amount of profit they needed to sustain high levels of production meant that films had to do well in both the domestic and foreign markets (Wasser, 1995). Hollywood began to utilize a shared-resources strategy by using foreign filmmakers, casts, and crews. In addition, the industry moved many production sites overseas, a model which is now known as runaway production. These strategies would lower costs and provide a larger market, increasing overall profit (Chung, 2007).

The second change was the content of Hollywood blockbusters. Explaining why Hollywood blockbusters have fared so well with foreign audiences, Diana Crane (2014), professor of sociology, says that “American filmmakers have developed a type of film that crosses national boundaries easily because it has eliminated a great deal of cultural complexity” (p. 375). She continues to say that there has been a transformation of the content of the films due to the need to attract foreign viewers, pointing out that there’s a definite contrast between the current Hollywood and the “mythical golden years of Hollywood spanning 1938-1960” (p. 375), where “faith in the democratic order, the classless society, heroic individualism and the golden opportunities offered by the capitalist work ethic and enterprise” (p. 375) projected a uniformed image. “...in American films of the past two decades, references to American culture are less specific while themes and motifs from other cultures are more prevalent. The so-called transnational film is better suited to appeal to highly diverse audiences in the global film market” (Crane, 2014, p. 379).

As these changes to Hollywood have occurred, their reliance on foreign markets have grown as they invest more and more money into producing large-scale films to appeal to the global audience. In 1980, 30% of Hollywood film revenue was from export. By 2000, that number had risen to 50% (Lau, 2007), and by 2016, the foreign box office receipts for the top 50 films through November 20th accounted for 69% of all box office sales (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

This globalization of Hollywood and its success in foreign markets has engendered some fear in from national powers, and many countries have begun to implement policies to protect their national film industries (Chung, 2007). China provides one of the best examples.

China and Hollywood

As China began to liberalize some of its markets in the 1990s, Hollywood took advantage of a “golden opportunity” to expand its audience further. Despite fear in China of the consequences of American film in the country, in 1994 the government began to allow ten mega-productions per year in hopes of boosting China’s struggling national film industry (Crane, 2014). Most of these productions were Hollywood blockbusters (Crane, 2014).

The Hollywood domination of the Chinese film industry was swift. Hollywood films quickly claimed 70% of the market (Crane, 2014) and, in 1998, *Titanic* alone accounted for 20% of the total gross of all films that year (Lau, 2007).

The success of Hollywood films triggered an ongoing debate in China throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Su, 2011). One side of the debate argued that “American cultural supremacy is a result of global capitalism, and cultural products like Hollywood films help to colonize a global audience and help form a hegemonic culture, which has threatened and is threatening the existence of other cultures and the creation of alternatives ways of life” (Su,

2011, p. 187). They feared that “through such cultural infiltration, the Chinese people would lose both their collective national identity and their direction in globalized surroundings” (Su, 2011, p. 193).

The Chinese on the other side of this debate had two different arguments. First, they argued that Hollywood isn’t even American in content anymore (Su, 2011). Especially when it came to large blockbusters, Hollywood films have become so transnationalized that calling them “American” would downplay the many influences from the rest of the world (Su, 2011). In this way, Hollywood films can be seen more as products of global culture than a US-centric point of view. Their second argument was that “culture cannot be invaded, and that culture can only exchange, integrate and transform through its own logic” (Su, 2011, p. 195). In other words, due to the Chinese people’s ability to think for themselves and choose what they want, Chinese culture cannot be overrun by a film that may or may not be promoting American culture.

As time went by, China gradually recognized the universality of Hollywood and decided that Chinese films could learn from these transnationalized Hollywood films (Su, 2011). To better compete in the world market, the government decided that China would begin producing their own films that reflect universal themes (Crane, 2014).

While the idea of what makes a transnational film has already been discussed in this paper, a further look into some examples of these types of films will prove helpful to this discourse.

Case Examples

The Hollywood Transnational Film

The development of Hollywood's transnational blockbusters have been discussed. But what types of films are these? What do they actually look like? And how successful have they been? The table provided

on this page provides insight into the answers.

Many of these films are from the fantasy or science fiction genre, located in exotic places, and focused on main characters that are often very other-worldly.

Another common trend

Top 20 films worldwide by gross box office, 2009

	Original title	Studio	Country of origin	North Amer. box office	Intl box office	Total
1.	Harry Potter/Half-Blood Prince	Warner	GB Inc/ USA	302	632	934
2.	Avatar	Fox	USA/GB	352	547	899
3.	Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	Fox	USA	197	691	888
4.	Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	Paramount	USA	402	433	835
5.	2012	Sony	USA/CA	163	591	754
6.	Up	Disney	USA	293	417	710
7.	New Moon	Summit	USA	288	400	688
8.	Angels & Demons	Sony	USA	133	352	485
9.	The Hangover	Warner	USA/DE	277	190	467
10.	Night at the Museum	Fox	USA/CA	177	238	415
11.	Star Trek	Paramount	USA	258	128	386
12.	Monsters vs. Aliens	Par-D'Works	USA	198	183	381
13.	X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Fox	USA	180	195	375
14.	Terminator Salvation	WB-Sony	USA	125	247	372
15.	Fast & Furious	Universal	USA	155	208	363
16.	Inglourious Basterds	Weinstein-U	USA/DE	121	199	320
17.	The Proposal	Disney	USA	164	153	317
18.	A Christmas Carol	Disney	USA	137	174	311
19.	G.I. Joe: Rise of Cobra	Paramount	USA/CZ	150	152	302
20.	G-Force	Disney	USA	119	165	284

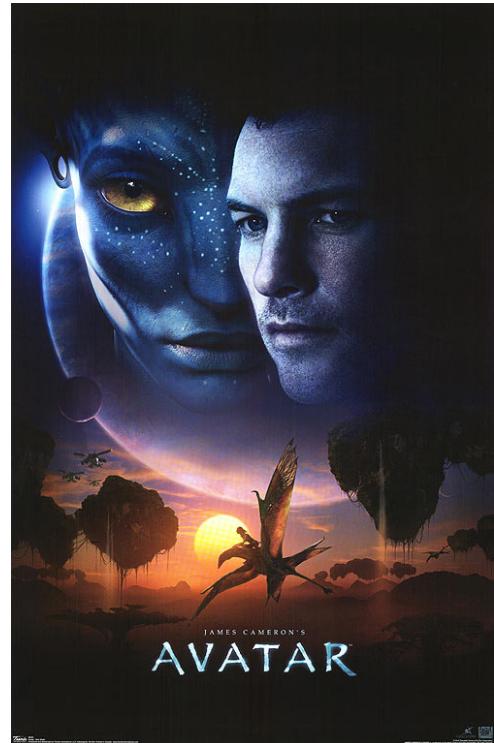
(European Audiovisual Observatory, 2010)

in these films is that they are delocalized, sometimes to an extreme. Their location is completely foreign to anyone on earth. They also have themes that appeal universally, such as good vs. evil, love vs. hatred, and war vs. peace. And the “country of origin” column shows that there is often production collaboration between countries. They also make a lot of money in both domestic and foreign markets. Tanner Mirrlees, a communications professor, also points out the blockbuster’s use of action and what he refers to as the “spectacle.” He says, “the production of spectacular films to be viewed on the big screen (and in 3-D) is a way of distinguishing

Hollywood blockbusters from small screen B-grade films and TV shows" (Mirrlees, 2013, p. 188).

Whereas during the Cold War, when many Hollywood films featured Russians as the enemies, blockbusters today often feature enemies that are not even from our planet. The Transformers franchise—one of which is located at spot number four on the chart above—is a perfect example of this. They employ a “good vs. evil” plotline, and—while the good guys are a combination of regular human beings from earth and an organic techno robotic species from some distant planet—the bad guys are an evil branch of the organic techno robots bent on conquering earth. The outcome is that the good guys win and that earth is saved, an outcome all global citizens can celebrate. Another aspect of the Transformers franchise that makes it so successful on a global scale is the use of action and 3D technology.

Avatar, the second film on the list, provides another excellent example of a transnational film. It explores themes like love, peace, and humankind’s relationship to nature and features a diverse set of characters, including an extremely humanized alien race. Most of the film takes place on a different planet, which creates scenes that provide something new and exciting to anyone watching it. And like the Transformers franchise, Avatar has plenty of action, and the extensive use of 3D technology makes it a dazzling display of color and motion.



The Chinese Transnational Film

As the Hollywood blockbuster continues to dominate film markets, other countries are beginning to copy this model, hoping to get a foot in the market. China is no exception to this trend. Crane (2014) says, “In the past decade, the Chinese film industry has begun to produce its own blockbusters, copying Hollywood’s approaches to the global market with huge budgets, stellar casts, special effects, and expensive marketing campaigns” (p. 369).

The Chinese transnational film can best be seen in the martial arts genre. Martial arts was an incredibly popular film genre in China, but the release of several films by famous art filmmakers Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou put the genre on the global map (Lau, 2007). Instead of the quick action and direct plotlines of other martial arts films, these two traditionally independent artistic filmmakers made much more artful films that showed an aspect of Chinese culture that revealed the grace and beauty of the action, tying it to more universal themes (Lau,



2007).

While Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was the first Chinese film to achieve global distribution and performed extremely well with North American audiences, it failed miserably in the Chinese market, mostly due to cultural incongruities, such as the Cantonese-accented Mandarin of the lead Chinese actors (Lau, 2007).

Attempting to circumnavigate the issues with Ang Lee's film, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* was created to do well in both markets. “Zhang’s goal was to make a

culturally specific and technically sophisticated film that would appeal to both East and West” (Lau, 2007, p. 5). The year it was released, the total revenue for all films in China was 9 billion Yuan and Hero accounted for 2.5 billion alone (Lau, 2007). While it did not perform quite as well as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in Western markets, it still exceeded expectations (Lau, 2007).

The film also has numerous attributes of a transnational film. Its budget of \$30 million was double the budget of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and was far larger than any other Chinese film at the time (Chung, 2007). It had a globally recognizable cast and a crew representing multiple nationalities and an extensive background of previous professional experience (Lau, 2007). The epic visuals and universal themes of the film also appeal to a global audience. Hero has been lauded as a masterpiece of art as it “portrays martial arts not simply as bodily movements with force to subdue but as an expression of the human spirit” (Lau, 2007, p. 7).

Discussion & Conclusion

In order to make more money, Hollywood is de-culturalizing its films to appeal to a global audience. Transnational filmmaking, in the pursuit of creating culturally proximate films, are taking the specific culture out of the story and relying on universal themes. Thus, “Hollywood studios are no longer institutions of national culture” (Wasser, 1995, p. 455), which counters the cultural imperialism argument that has plagued the global Hollywood discourse.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006), in his article *The case for contamination*, addresses the idea of cultural imperialism, saying that it is normal for cultures to change over time and that people should have the right to choose what they want, borrowing from the Audience Reception Theory line of thinking. He also says that “cultures are made of continuities and changes, and the identity of a society can survive through these changes. Societies without change aren’t authentic; they’re just dead!” (Appiah, 2006, p. 44). He argues that some individuals attempt to preserve culture for the sake of preserving culture. In the face of change, the culture that remains is no longer authentic. People and societies change throughout history and to stand in the way of that change is to choose culture over people (Appiah, 2006). He also notes that “Yes, globalization can produce homogeneity, but globalization is also a threat to homogeneity” (Appiah, 2006, p. 40). Globalization, in this way of thinking, produces opportunities for societies and cultures to share and grow from each other. Without exposure to new ideas and ways of living, many cultures may get left behind as the rest of the world evolves.

In the case of Hollywood in China, this global exposure has led to positive developments. The two different groups in China had different outlooks on what Hollywood might bring to the country, representing both the Cultural Imperialism and Audience Reception theories. Hollywood was allowed access to the Chinese film market in hopes that it would boost the Chinese national film industry. Not only has Hollywood enjoyed the enormous profits from one of the largest film markets in the world, but China’s film industry has also become a force in its own right. This is a feature of a market-based global economy. In 2015, Chinese filmmakers claimed seven of the top 10 spots in the Chinese box office (Brzeski, 2016), indicating that the Chinese film industry is continuing to grow and continuing to challenge Hollywood in certain markets. In this way, China has “mobilized the media and cultural sector to promote Chinese

‘soft power’’ (Su, 2011, p. 187), meaning that China has learned from Hollywood that beauty is advantageous. In other words, China has taken what Hollywood has offered and turned it into something beneficial for themselves, improving not only their national film industry, but their seat in the global community as well.

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