



Introduction

World Filmmaking and the Hollywood Blockbuster

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INTERNATIONAL FILMMAKING can be understood within two forums or contexts. Each forum is conjoined with the other, and, together, they form a dynamic process that has been ongoing throughout the history of cinema. There is the global context, and there are the local contexts. The global context tends to be the domain of Hollywood cinema, marketed by the international distribution arms of the major studios. The overseas markets are extremely important to Hollywood, and it routinely exports its product to these venues, helping to make American film style a kind of international norm. However, using a phrase like “American film style” reveals how central and overwhelming Hollywood has come to be in cultural and economic contexts. It is, of course, North American film style to which I am referring. Filmmaking flourishes in Cuba, has stuttered in Nicaragua, and continues in Argentina, Brazil, and other countries in Central and South America, yet because of Hollywood’s cultural hegemony, none can claim to represent “American film style.”

Offsetting the globalization of Hollywood cinema are the various national and regional cinemas throughout the world, many of which offer genres and styles of film that vary considerably from Hollywood products. The relationship between these contexts—the global and the local—can be fraught with tension. Hollywood’s marketing imperative is to extend its

model of cinema throughout the world, so that audiences in Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Germany, Ireland, and everywhere else will develop a taste for American movies. During a recent visit to Japan, for example, I noticed posters for *The Lord of the Rings* throughout Tokyo. The film had not yet opened in Japan, but Hollywood was already prepping the market.

Regional filmmakers, however, may chafe against the forces of homogenization that Hollywood can seem to represent, and they can find creative solutions to the problem of undue influence from Hollywood by being responsive to indigenous aesthetic and cultural traditions and regional social issues, and by fashioning an alternative (to Hollywood) cinema around these. This can be a difficult process, however, because the mechanisms of film distribution often favor U.S. productions and tend to skew foreign production in terms of emulating them. As Teresa Hoefert de Turégano points out in her discussion of African film in this issue, audiences there are accustomed to seeing Hollywood-type films, but many viewers nevertheless patronize African productions when they are available. The problem is, it can be difficult to crack the distribution and exhibition circuit so as to make these films available. In an alternative scenario, political factors can sometimes intervene to block Hollywood’s access to a foreign market. In his essay in this issue, Yingjin Zhang points





Hollywood absorbs foreign film influences by employing expatriate filmmakers and by remaking overseas hits. *Sommersby* (1993), for example, starring Jodie Foster and Richard Gere, was a remake of the popular French film *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* (1982).

out that the Korean War ended Hollywood's dominance of the Chinese market, and U.S. moviemakers thereafter faced sharp quotas on the number of films they could export to China.

Much in the history of film can be written in terms of these dynamics between Hollywood and indigenous cinema markets, and, as the examples of Africa and China indicate, the specific nature of the relationship can vary from region to region. In general, however, American cinema moved early and aggressively into world markets, in the teens and 1920s, and has not relinquished its presence since. Thus, in a very real sense, Hollywood has never relied on the domestic market alone. No corresponding situation exists in the United States with regard to the dominant cultural presence of an overseas film producer. Indeed, if somehow U.S. screens were to suddenly begin showing as much foreign product as overseas screens show U.S. product, North American viewers might think they were suddenly inhabiting another planet. Such a situation is not remotely within the realm of cultural possibility. Foreign films are distributed in the United States, but their numbers are miniscule compared with the pervasiveness and visibility of Hollywood films overseas.

Thus, in one sense, global cinema is not really global at all, if that term be understood to represent a kind of equivalent cross-fertilization of filmmaking practices the world over. Rather, the term *global* tends to stand for the export practices of one national cinema throughout the world.

THE CURRENT ISSUE of *World Literature Today* and *WLT Magazine* aims to evoke the countertradition to globalization by highlighting distinguished national and regional cinemas. In discussions of international film, attention is routinely given to the cinemas of the major industrial countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Instead of using space in this issue to examine filmmaking in these familiar and often-discussed contexts, it seems more interesting and useful to consider cinema in vital and

vibrant yet less frequently covered contexts, such as Africa, India, China, the Balkans, and Brazil.

Because the essays in this issue examine cinema in its diverse local contexts, in this opening essay I want to spend a little more time talking about the global presence of Hollywood film. For, whereas the other authors in this issue rightly celebrate the diverse currents of expression in international cinema, we would be naïve to think that the medium is simply a means of cultural and artistic creation, amenable to the uses to which regional artists may put it. Cinema is an industry that today is a subset of the operations of multinational communications corporations. Hollywood film provides these corporations with an ideal means of servicing a global market. Here, then, I would like to set the stage for the work of the other contributors by profiling the role of Hollywood in global cinema, indicating how Hollywood functions in world markets and why these markets are now so important for the industry.

Hollywood needs its global box office for very compelling reasons. To enumerate these, we need to consider some of the paradoxes of the industry's economic operation. First, consider the sheer size of the global box office. For the industry's biggest moneymakers, overseas markets typically generate much more money than the domestic U.S. and Canadian market. After ten weeks in distribution, for example, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* had grossed \$500 million overseas, compared with \$328 million domestically. The biggest moneymaker of 2001 was *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. After fifteen weeks in release, the sequel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, had grossed \$600 million overseas compared with "only" \$260 million in the domestic market.¹ These figures demonstrate clearly that, in terms of global revenues, the domestic market is less important than overseas markets. To date, the highest earning picture in world markets remains *Titanic* (1997), with a global gross of \$1.8 billion.

The overall size of the international market is impressive. In 2002 international box-office gross hit \$10 billion, with more than half coming from Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.² In the overseas markets, Hollywood films produced by the major studios predominate at the top of box-office charts. During the week of June 6, 2002, the leading box-office film in Japan was *Spider-Man*, and of the top ten there, seven were Hollywood pictures (including *Panic Room*, *Shallow Hal*, and *Ali*). That same week, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* was the top film in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Spain, Australia, Germany, France, and Italy.

Of the top 125 films worldwide in 2001, only four were foreign pictures unreleased in the U.S. In other words, American film production/distribution accounted for 99.9 percent of the world's top-earning films that year. This pattern, in turn, was highly typical of previous years. Thus, while many indigenous film industries, such as those in India and Hong Kong, remain tremendously popular with their home audiences, their



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products do not generally enjoy the kind of global distribution typical of Hollywood films.

The window of opportunity to earn money at the box office today closes quickly. Box office is ephemeral, and a film's earnings fall rapidly after the opening weekend. *Pearl Harbor* (2001) earned nearly 40 percent of its total domestic box office during the opening weekend. By the third week of release for *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, its domestic box-office revenues had fallen by 65 percent. This is a typical pattern for nearly all Hollywood films today. The rate at which box-office sales diminish creates enormous incentive for the Hollywood studios to get their films into quick release overseas, where the same rapid, early accumulation of earnings prevails, followed by decline. From its opening on May 31 until June 4, 2002, *Attack of the Clones* grossed \$166 million throughout seventy countries. By June 23, however, its overseas earnings had only increased to \$207 million.

Complicating this earnings picture is the huge cost of film production, which, in turn, increases the importance of overseas markets. Hollywood spends so much money making its expensive blockbusters that it must move aggressively to market them in all available venues in order to have a chance of seeing some return on the investment. The big time bomb ticking away within the industry is its runaway production costs, which have been escalating at a mad inflationary rate for more than two decades.

In 1980 the average cost of making a movie was only \$9 million, but that decade saw the onset of the ruinous inflation that currently besets the industry. By 1989 the average had risen to \$24 million. A decade later it stood at \$52 million. In 2002 it was \$59 million. Advertising and marketing costs have increased at a comparable rate. In 2002 they were \$31 million, bringing the average cost of making and promoting a movie that year to nearly \$100 million.³ Beset by rising production and marketing costs, Hollywood needs a global audience. At the level of financing that currently prevails, the industry can no longer survive on proceeds from the domestic market alone.

Thus, blockbusters have become the most visible sign of Hollywood's ascendancy worldwide. Current industry jargon calls these films "tentpole" pictures because one blockbuster will prop up a studio's quarterly or even annual earnings report.

Blockbusters have a certain predictable profile. *Harry Potter*, *Shrek*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Mummy Returns*, *Jurassic Park III*, *Planet of the Apes*, *The Lord of the Rings*—these are not small, character-centered films in which acting and writing are the jewels. They are oriented toward spectacle and hyperbolic special effects because these translate very well cross-culturally. No subtitles are required for a viewer in Thailand to enjoy the basic premise of *Jurassic Park III*, which is "run from the dinosaurs." Indeed, many traditional qualities of cinema—storytelling skill, narrative sophistication, good writing, skilled acting—are quite lacking in such pictures as *Pearl Harbor* and *Planet of the Apes*, yet each film pegged its appeal to the ability of modern effects wizardry and did so quite successfully.

In 1990, at a Screen Actors Guild conference, actor Meryl Streep criticized the economic factors that had skewed film production toward the action blockbuster. The chief factor, in her view, was the importance of the overseas market: "People don't need to understand English to know something is exploding and to enjoy that spectacle. They don't call it the bottom line for nothing. Where have all the classic films gone? Look under the wheels of the blockbusters."⁴

Streep was identifying mainly action blockbusters. Explosions, though, are not the only element of blockbusters intended by Hollywood to hold cross-cultural appeal. More important even than the spectacle of big things blowing up is the general display of digital wizardry to create novel and wondrous cinematic sights. The appeal of fantasy is perhaps now the chief requisite of a blockbuster because these films have assumed the function of introducing and displaying next-generation visual effects, promising moviegoers sights and sounds (however hokey the narratives to which they may be attached) that are more sensual, vivid, kinesthetic, and sonically enveloping than ever before. Eight of the top ten films in 2001, for example, were fantasies in which, quite literally, the stars were digital special effects. The special effects and fantasy narratives sold the films internationally, much to the delight of the studios that produced them because big star salaries, which drive up production costs, were not required.

In the blockbuster, Hollywood exports a model of film that contains an implicit threat to the diversity of international film culture. The blockbuster's international appeal, achieved via





The overseas market is an essential part of Hollywood's operation, and big-name stars can draw huge audiences. Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* was marketed not as a Spielberg film but as a Tom Cruise picture.

fantasy, digital effects, and spectacle, threatens to engulf alternative models and practices of filmmaking. When a handful of films produced in one country dominate box-office charts the world over, international culture begins to seem less heterogeneous and more the projection of one nation-state's culture industry. An additional characteristic of blockbusters compounds this state of affairs. All the major Hollywood studios operate product-licensing subsidiaries that license the rights to blockbuster characters for merchants and retailers. Film-based product merchandising is an extremely important revenue source for the industry, and blockbuster films are designed to maximize this revenue. *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Jurassic Park*—blockbusters typically feature mechanical or fantasy characters that are already toylike. These characters lend themselves to replication as commodities, and blockbusters unleash a tidal wave of toys, clothing, games, books, records, and fast-food tie-ins with movie characters. As a result, Hollywood films exert tremendous influence over the buying habits of overseas viewers and the cultural forms tied to those habits. Hollywood's product-licensing revenues totaled \$70 billion in 2001. The *Star Wars* movies have grossed more than \$1 billion at the U.S. box office, but merchandising related to the films has generated *more than four times as much revenue*.

While its biggest films crowd out domestic product in the cinemas of overseas nations, Hollywood also feeds rather voraciously on those cinemas. It siphons talent away; prominent directors, editors, cinematographers, and production designers find the lure of Hollywood's resources difficult to resist. Polish cinematographer Slavomir Idziak, for example, shot Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Blue* (1993), *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), and *Dekalog* (1998) and now works in Hollywood, where he shot

Black Hawk Down (2001) and *Proof of Life* (2000). Jost Vacano shot Wolfgang Petersen's *Das Boot* (1981) and Paul Verhoeven's *Soldier of Orange* (1977) and now, like those directors, makes Hollywood films (*The Hollow Man*, 2000).

In its constant search for story ideas and for new properties, Hollywood frequently turns to foreign films and treats them as vehicles for remakes. To do so, of course, it must Americanize the themes, characters, and story situations that the original production has defined in terms of another culture. Hollywood has not hesitated in doing so, of course, and the foreign-film remake has become an enduring feature of contemporary U.S. cinema.

For his follow-up to *Memento*, director Christopher Nolan selected a 1997 Norwegian film, *Insomnia*, and "Americanized" it by switching the setting from Norway to Alaska and casting Hollywood stars Al Pacino and Robin Williams. In the process, he took the opaque and ambiguous events and characters of the Norwegian original and clarified them to the point of transparency with quick, easily read motivations. U.S. critics praised the remake, many scarcely aware of the original film and its rather more interesting mysteries and opacities.

Director Steven Soderbergh (*Traffic*, *Erin Brockovich*) and producer James Cameron (*Terminator*, *Titanic*) recently remade the classic Russian film *Solaris*, which was directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, one of Russian cinema's most outstanding filmmakers. The remake was partly marketed as a star vehicle for George Clooney, and, as with *Insomnia*, the poetic density and lack of clarity in Tarkovsky's film had to be sacrificed for the domestic U.S. market.

Many contemporary star vehicles are foreign-film remakes. *Vanilla Sky* (2002), starring Tom Cruise, was based on a 1997 Spanish film called *Abre los ojos*. *K-Pax* (2002), which starred Kevin Spacey and Jeff Bridges, was an unofficial remake of another Spanish film, *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (1986). The Nicolas Cage–Meg Ryan romance, *City of Angels* (1998), was an update of Wim Wenders's classic German film, *Wings of Desire* (1986). The Bruce Willis action film *Last Man Standing* (1996) was a sorry variation on Akira Kurosawa's classic samurai film, *Yojimbo* (1961). *The Birdcage* (1996), with Robin Williams and Nathan Lane, was an Americanization of the French comedy *La Cage aux folles*. *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), with Bruce Willis, was a feature-length remake of the classic French short *La jetée* (1962).

THIS IS JUST A SAMPLING of Hollywood's ongoing effort to recycle the work of international filmmakers for American audiences. Many other titles could be cited, but obviously all such sources for remakes are perceived by the studios funding them as being translatable into a domestic U.S. context. At the same time, many of world cinema's great film treasures—those that are stylistically deviant from Hollywood norms, for example, or contain left-wing politics—tend to resist Hollywood's recycling efforts. Hollywood remakes of *The Battle of Algiers*, *Viva la muerte*, or *Weekend* are going to be a long time coming. The U.S.



film industry is relatively selective about what it chooses to assimilate.

While other national cinemas—Hong Kong and India, for example—match or surpass Hollywood’s rate of film production, no other matches its worldwide reach or omnivorous appetite for devouring overseas talent and properties. The foregoing portrait of global Hollywood film suggests that the economics of its operation exert a culturally homogenizing influence. In that context, the presentation of this special film section aims to spotlight the alternative of international diversity and to acquaint readers with some of the most interesting and significant traditions of contemporary filmmaking outside the Hollywood paradigm, as found in India, China, the Balkans, Africa, and Brazil.

Yingjin Zhang offers a very detailed historical discussion of filmmaking in China, and, like some of the other authors, he finds that the era of globalization has made national labels—like “Chinese” cinema—somewhat problematic because of the tangled skein of international financing that backs many film projects. Glauco Ortolano and Julie Porter offer a sketch of the historical movements within Brazilian cinema, one of the most vibrant national cinemas in the southern hemisphere and a strong reminder of why American cinema and Hollywood cinema are not the same. Priya Jaikumar characterizes Indian cinema as “prolific and inundating” and gives us a historical sketch of its development and a discussion of its stylistic characteristics, many of which seem quite deviant if measured by the norms of American cinema. India’s “Bollywood,” however, is one of the few overseas cinemas that has retained a popular hold on its indigenous public, so much so that Hollywood films have experienced difficulty penetrating this market.

Compared with these national traditions, other exciting cinemas are situated within a more regional context. Teresa Hoefert de Turégano explores African cinema and notes that this very term remains somewhat ambiguous. Films made by directors in certain countries, such as Tunisia, are labeled as national cinema whereas other filmmakers, such as Senegal’s Ousmane Sembene, are referred to, more regionally, as African filmmakers. Hoefert de Turégano explores production and distribution on the continent and critical issues that run through much of the filmmaking.

Finally, Andrew Horton explores a topic that at first may seem rather paradoxical—a tradition of comic filmmaking within the Balkans, a region that in recent decades has been the site of horrendous slaughter and civil war. And yet Horton explains how uniquely equipped comedy is to deal with this reality and how it has been shaped by the specific nature of the Balkan context.

This collection of essays will give readers a sampling of cinema’s rich international forms and the heritage of styles and stories that the medium has produced as it responds to the



Special-effects wizardry is a key part of Hollywood’s global appeal, enabling it to market its products across different cultures. The *Jurassic Park* films, for example, brought next-generation digital effects to old-fashioned monster-movie formulas.

heterogeneity of social and cultural communities. Out of the shadow of the blockbusters, cinema, it turns out, remains quite a multiform and variegated medium. **WLT**

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¹ *Variety*, March 3–9, 2003, page 19.

² Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), U.S. Economic Reviews, International Theatrical Market, www.mpa.org/useconomicreview.

³ MPAA, U.S. Economic Reviews, International Theatrical Market.

⁴ Connie Danese, “SAG Conference Addresses (and Denounces) Female Struggles in Films and TV,” *Backstage*, August 17, 1990, page 3.

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