



Hollywood, The American Image and The Global Film Industry

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Abstract

The emergence of indigenous film industries across the world has been seen by many as a threat to the influence of Hollywood on the movie scene. This paper tries to look at the ideological influence of Hollywood on movies the world over. The paper considered the Chinese, Indian and the Nigerian film industries. The three industries were chosen because of their popularity in their continents and some parts of the world. The Theory of Cultural Imperialism is the supporting theory for this paper.

Keywords: *Haolaiwu zhuyi, Hollywoodization, Hollywoodism, Remakes, Redos, Nollywood, PorNollywood, Mouse Zedong*



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Introduction

In a continent like Africa especially in Nigeria where I come from, the common man on the street sees any foreign movie that is not Indian or Chinese as American. To them, American films form the standard for movies worth their salt. Blakley (2001) captured this perception by saying “modernizing developing countries, rather than creating self-sufficiency, merely fostered dependency within an exploitative system of global economic relations. This dependency was aided by a one-way flow of technology and media hardware coupled with the continuous flow of Western cultural products into poor countries.” It is not only in Africa that Hollywood has come to dominate the way of thinking of filmmakers and the audience, it is the same in film industries all over the world. Rodman (2012) observed this when he stated “although movies from around the world continue to influence American filmmakers, their impact pales in comparison with that of Hollywood’s output on the rest of the world.” The author concluded by saying “the films of other countries are often clever remakes of Hollywood films, rewritten to adjust to local culture.”

Hollywood has succeeded in selling America to the world; America is seen as a utopian society that is devoid of errors. After the September 11th terrorist attacks on America, some local traders were involved in a heated argument that it was not America, they believed America had some sophisticated gadgets that would have intercepted the planes before they hit the twin towers. In the words of one of them after coming to terms with the shocking reality that it was indeed America that was attacked, he said “ Leave Osama alone, America will show

him Rambo.” This is what Hollywood has done to public perception. The projection of American values and products in bright colours has been observed by scholars. Maisuwong (2012) observed that the world audience became consumerist overnight after watching movies, for example, the culture of eating low carb food in American movies caused the popularity of global consumer brands like McDonald’s, KFC, pizza, and so forth. Hollywood film is the American ideological medium of mass communication, it has influences to the movie industries in several countries as well. This process is called Hollywoodization, in which the Hollywood affect the movie industries in Asia to adopt the production style, dressing, or even imitate the name of Hollywood, as such. Cowen (2001) corroborated this by saying “despite these powerful universalist forces, the American and national component to Hollywood moviemaking cannot be ignored. Hollywood has always drawn upon the national ethos of the United States for cinematic inspiration.” Hollywood has shaped the movie industries around the world in most cases to fit into its mold. Many films with settings outside the United States must have a taste of America in one way or the other. The international exploitation of entertainment products is an essential element in the development of Hollywood’s entertainment content, which is oftentimes produced and distributed domestically at a deficit (Weinberg 2005). Hollywood studios are interested in increasing their presence in relevant territories to capture a larger share of local entertainment consumption in various markets, both in the movie and the TV segments. As a result, they have started to engage in coproduction in foreign languages and with foreign entities.

Hollywood and the American Image

Powdermaker (1950) in Sigismondi (2012) describe Hollywood as such: “Hollywood is a unique American phenomenon with a symbolism not limited to this country. It means many things to many people.” To those who have no idea of how movies are produced, they believe all movies linked to Hollywood are produced within the four walls of Hollywood. Hollywood is defined as the system of the US entertainment industry revolving around the following six major companies that are part of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA): Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, Universal City Studios, and Warner Bros. Entertainment (Sigismondi 2012). Hollywood can therefore be defined as a “global industry geographically concentrated”, with its entities physically located in Southern California with a truly global reach (Veron 1999). It is every nation’s dream to be a superpower. To achieve this feat, leaders must have a mindset that will sell their country’s image to the world. I think this has been achieved by the United States of America through Hollywood. My position has been declared much earlier by Walt (2006) when he stated, “America’s leaders have sought to persuade as many countries as possible to embrace their particular vision of a liberal- capitalist world order.” To achieve this vision as pointed out by Walt, Bi (2012) stated that “culture, in particular the movies produced by Hollywood, are one of the cornerstones of this endeavour. A byword for the American dream, Hollywood serves to extol the virtues of the American way of life, promotes major industrial products and builds and reinforces a positive national image.” Bi (2012) continued by pointing out that “Hollywood movies seek to build a national image characterized by freedom, equality, prosperity and other positive aspects. Concepts such as “freedom” and “equality” are reinforced through storylines.” Hollywood movies are key

cultural artifacts that offer a window into American cultural and social history. The way these movies have influenced the culture of people around the world is a major source of concern as expressed by Burrowes (2011) “the success of American film has led to other nations fearing that their own cultural identity would be tainted, altered somehow by this Hollywood influence.”

HOLLYWOOD, A GLOBAL CINEMA

Tom Brook in his article, “How the Global Box Office is Changing Hollywood”, described Hollywood thus “Hollywood is like an octopus with tentacles extending across the globe.” The success of Hollywood as global brand did not come overnight it was something that has evolved over a long period of time. While looking at how Hollywood was able to achieve this, Burrowes (2011) said “they are good at making movies and more importantly, they are really good at selling them. Hollywood’s success didn’t happen because they were making movies for everyone – it happened because they could convince you that the movie was for you.” To maintain such influence on the world, Hollywood had to deviate from just looking at storylines that are American, this adjustment is not only in the story line but even in the composition of the cast. They have to incorporate people from other countries to play major roles in movies with storylines about such countries. This will mean scripts that may look offensive to a certain people will be avoided. Clearly, Hollywood has to tread carefully. It cannot afford to reinforce old stereotypes if it wants to make money in the international marketplace (Brook 2013). Hollywoodization, a concept introduced by Por Kuldip Rampal is a process whereby Hollywood affects the movie industries in Asia to adopt the production style, dressing, or even imitate the name of Hollywood. A closer look at the movie industries in

Africa and South America shows that Hollywoodization has become a global concept not only peculiar to Asia as observed by Rampal. Since Hollywood influences the movie industries around the world, on the other side, Hollywood as well gains the benefits from its Hollywoodization. Hollywood tries to take advantage of its popularity over local audiences and distribute films in many other languages (Maisuwung 2012). The same scholar opined that Hollywood is an American instrument, so the access of Hollywood to the world is the access of America. So the world society which is seen as globalized but it is subtly Americanized. This view is strongly supported by Burrowes' statement that "may be global cinema does exist, but it doesn't exist instead of an American cinema. What we identify as global cinema is really nothing more that Americanisation of culture, globally."

Hollywood and the Global Film Industry

The portrait of Hollywood's domination of the global film industry was best painted by the movie director, Steven Spielberg in Branston (2000) "it is not domination by American cinema. It is just the magic of storytelling and it unites the world." The unity brought about by this magic of storytelling has been termed by many as cultural imperialism. Miller (2010) said "perhaps the most widespread social anxiety about film is to do with concerns about cultural Imperialism. Cinema has been a model for the global prominence of US culture, underwritten by the state." The Russian born film commentator Alexander Basky was quoted by John Trumbour in Wasko and McDonald (2008) explaining why Hollywood is the dominant force in global movie making. "The movies of today are a vast industry supplying the nations of the world with a standardized, machine- made entertainment." Trumbour (2008) explained that "throughout the twentieth century, Hollywood carried out many productions with an

overwhelming international presence.” This strategy had to be adopted in order to send a message to the rest of the world that their interests are well represented in Hollywood. He continued by saying “while Hollywood from its early history may have developed a better grasp of globalization than many other industry sectors, there are new frontiers expanding the global reach of media conglomerates.”

Even territories with laws that had been obstacles to the penetration of Hollywood movies are gaining access to such content as a result of the Internet and satellite broadcasting. “today, China, via Hong Kong has welcomed a Disney theme park, and the Hollywoodization of Sino-communism is now referred to as the rise of Mouse Zedong” (Trumpbour 2008). The scholar quoted a university don in Hong Kong, Francis Lui as saying “ideology is totally unimportant. All that matters is business and Disney is no threat to the communist party. Both are very conservative in their outlooks.” Let’s take a look at the impact of Hollywood on the film industries in India, China and Nigeria.

India

Indian movies used to be a reflection of the culture of the people of the Indian sub-continent. In these movies, the audience enjoy the melodious songs and the dance that accompany the actions in the movies. According to Rampal (2012), India produces more than 800 feature films each year in many languages. Explicit romance was not part of the Indian films that graced the screens before the last two decades of the new millennium. But the influence of Hollywood on the Indian movies brought a new trend in the costume and settings of such films. Maisuwong (2012) “As a result of Hollywoodization, the Bollywood began to touch more on the love scenes and sex scenes.” The scholar continued his observation on this

matter saying “Bollywood is threatening the values and culture of the Indian people. In the past, Bollywood was bound strongly to the storylines of good and evil, boys meet girls, and family oriented. Hence, the influence of Hollywood is transplanting the Western ideas, which are extremely rude, to Indian society.” This observation had been made much earlier by Baburao Patel in 1951 as quoted in McDonald and Wasko (2008) “pictures after pictures were sent to india during the two wars- pictures that taught us to dance rhumbas and sambas; pictures that taught us to coo and woo; pictures that taught us to moon and croon; pictures that taught us to kill and steal; pictures that taught us to utter “Hi” and “Gee”; pictures that taught us devilry and divorce and pictures that took us to jinks and drinks.” If Patel were to rewrite his statement today, he would have added so many negative rhyming words that are totally strange to the Indian culture. Part of the influence of Hollywood on the Indian film industry is the name Bollywood. Maisuwong (2012) gave the origin of the name thus: “Bollywood is a name of Indian movie industry, the name is primarily based on the Western city of Bombay.” The presence of Hollywood in India may not be seen in terms of public patronage of its movies against Bollywood movies because people will definitely identify with what is theirs. However, Hollywood is very much aware of this and that is why it is making a collaborative move in India. McDonald and Wasko (2008) said “Hollywood has moved towards an ongoing involvement in the Indian media industries, a transformation that tracks the historical shift from Hollywood as a studio system to Hollywood as a strategic singularity in an otherwise thoroughly dispersed set of financing and distribution practices.” The authors explained that Hollywood works to facilitate collaboration at all levels, particularly in the field of corporatization and technology, where the American media industries still offer a sense of

aspirational possibility for Indian film industries. With this in place, the influence of Hollywood on Bollywood is just beginning.

China

The Chinese film industry like Bollywood was popular around the world because of its martial arts displays. Children and youth alike in the 1980s could be seen displaying some martial arts skills after exposing themselves to some dose of Bruce Lee films. People learnt from such films the culture and religion of China. This Industry has had a long romance with Hollywood. McDonald and Wasko (2008) said “in the earliest days of silent films, Chinese directors already were keenly observant of the Hollywood style and techniques, having adopted analytical editing, soft focus, backlighting and masking from the Americans.” This statement was confirmed by Lent (2008) “Hollywood influences seeped into Chinese films with so many American films available and the existence of joint business operations.” Ye (2005) said “The US and China already had a joint venture in 1926 when the American Oriental Picture Co. was established.” This beautiful union was however interrupted with the outbreak of the Korean. Hollywood products were denied entrance into China. Lent (2008) quoted Yen thus: “A new term, *haolaiwu Zhuyi* (Hollywoodism), was coined to describe Chinese directors’ disapproval of American films.” As the years progressed, ties of friendship were reestablished, leading to Hollywood focusing on Asia. Lent (2005) said “ A number of factors have turned Hollywood’s eyes to Asia again in recent years, the most important of which being the fact that Asian governments, banks and other financial entities have pumped money into film’s advancement.” Within the new millennium, the Chinese film industry especially Hong Kong filmmakers have

adopted several Hollywood techniques in their productions. Hong Kong film industry also gains the Hollywood influence, but the film producers of Hong Kong take some inspiration from the Hollywood without losing the national identity and eliminating their products. Many Hong Kong movies follow and imitate the Hollywood style of production. John Woo, Hong Kong film director, he adopts the style of American director Sam Peckinpah (Rampal 2012). Recently, Hollywood has adopted the concept of co-producing. Lent (2008) said “coproducing in China has a number of important benefits for Hollywood, especially as a way to get around the 20 foreign film limitation put on imports.” Another strategy adopted by Hollywood to enhance its penetration of the Chinese film industry is the concept of remakes. Remakes refer to motion pictures produced based on a film that has been produced earlier. While describing the relevance of remakes to Hollywood, Xu (2005) said “remakes are good for Hollywood as they provide new stories and inexpensive outsourcing possibilities; East Asian filmmakers benefit in the money they get from the remakes offset their original production cost.” Closely related to remakes are redos. This involves transforming an existing storyline to suit the culture of another society. Another twist to the remake phenomenon involves Hollywood studios redoing their own films for Asian audiences. Walt Disney Pictures plans to shoot a live- action, martial arts remake of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in China, replacing the dwarfs with Shaolin monks (Lent 2008). With all these innovations introduced by Hollywood in China, it is obvious that its presence in China and its influence on the Chinese film industry has come to stay.

Nigeria

From the 1990s till date, the Nigerian film industry has grown steadily and has fast replaced Hollywood films in the homes of many Nigerians. Mbamara (2005) said “Nollywood is the name given to the Nigerian film industry and it is the highest grossing movie making industry behind Hollywood and the Indian film industry, Bollywood.” The writer went ahead to say that “the emergence of the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood is a cultural phenomenon and the Nigerian movies serve as a representation of Nigerian culture.” One would have been quick to say home grown productions have chased Hollywood away from the country but a closer look at the name of the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood suggests that it was coined from Hollywood. Nollywood films have become household names not only in Nigeria but in the entire African continent and are also popular among Africans in the diaspora. Nollywood movies are low budget movies with less sophistication in terms of equipment and production techniques when compared with Hollywood productions. For this reason, many can be produced within a short period of time. Aboutnollywood.com (2006) a site that writes on the Nigerian film industry explained that “unlike Hollywood and Bollywood, however, Nollywood movies are made on shoestring budgets of time and money. An average production takes just 10 days and costs approximately \$15000.” The site goes on to say “currently, some 300 producers churn out movies at an astonishing rate- somewhere between 500 and 1000 a year.” Though Nollywood has succeeded in keeping Hollywood out of many homes in the country, viewers now use Hollywood as a standard for assessing the quality of production of the Nollywood movies. First, there were concerns by many viewers that most of the stories are centered on witchcraft. Njoku (2009) gave his account of an interview he had with two Kenyan filmmakers, Mercy Murugi and Janet Kanini-muiva “they asserted that judging from

Nollywood movies, they have watched so far, many Kenyans have the impression that Nigeria is a traditional home of witches.” Well, this seems to have gotten to the producers because the script moved from witchcraft to semi nude dressing and sex, a common thing in Hollywood movies. One of the common complaints by many Nigerians is that Nollywood is gradually introducing some dose of pornography, a total deviation from the culture of Nigerians. This has led to some people calling the industry PorNollywood, instead of Nollywood. Oyetimi and Adebayo (2013) described the reaction of Nigerians thus: “ It was therefore an unpretentious and spontaneous irritation by the Nigerian audience that welcomed such gradual and unchecked introduction of pornography into Nollywood movies.” The number of Nollywood movies with erotic contents has continued to be on the rise. This is in addition to the violence portrayed by a good number of the movies. Hollywood is not done yet with the Nigerian film industry after all.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of cultural imperialism is more suitable to support this paper. Maisuwong (2012) said “Cultural Imperialism is a domination of a more recognized culture over other cultures, it is a soft mean of colonization.” Western ideologies, political beliefs, western science, western laws and social institutions, western moral concepts, sexual symbols and ideals of beauty, western working methods and leisure activities, western foods, western pop idols and the western concept of human existence have become objectives, examples and norms everywhere in the world. By watching American movies, people have come to see America as an ideal society where good always prevails over evil. Hollywood has set a standard in terms of movie making the world over. They have planted an ideology in the

subconscious of filmmakers and consumers of Hollywood products the world over that if it falls short of Hollywood standard, it is not good enough. So they continue to inject what they have seen in Hollywood in to their productions believing that it is the acceptable way of doing things.

Conclusion

Maisuwong (2012) described film as a global medium that reaches a huge amount of the audience with the same message while the film industry plays the leading role in the global media system. Film has served as a means of cultural exchange between countries. Over the years, Hollywood has dominated the movie industries across the world. From the findings of this paper, it is obvious that though each country tried to sell its values across frontiers. Over time, countries have developed their own film industries to suite the local audience and subsequently, to serve as source of foreign exchange. This has led to a decline in the patronage of Hollywood movies in such countries. But one thing that remains obvious is the fact that Hollywood's style of production, storylines and set designs are still seen in such films. The presence of America all over the films is obvious. As nations try as much as possible to outwit Hollywood in filmmaking in their respective domains, Hollywood is saying "I aint through with you yet" by coming up with different innovations that will make it to remain number one.

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