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Coming to America

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Abstract

Foreign films achieved a high level of distinction and visibility in the United States this year, but the international movie scene has been long in development. The author traces the roots of this phenomenon and discusses the reasons for “the increasingly accented cinema seen in America.” Timothy Corrigan is a professor of English and director of cinema studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and the author of several books, including most recently *The Film Experience* (2004), written with Patricia White.

Disciplines

Film and Media Studies | Film Production

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Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* was one of the foreign films nominated for an Academy Award in 2007. It won Oscars in three categories.

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Perhaps the most interesting feature of the 79th Annual Academy Awards, held in February 2007, has been the multiple nominations of three Mexican films: Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel*, Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*. The fact that only the last of these was nominated in the best foreign film category and that several other foreign films appeared in mainstream categories—such as the nominations for best actress of Helen Mirren in the British production *The Queen* and Penélope Cruz in the Spanish film *Volver*—suggest a

decidedly global range to what Hollywood has chosen to honor. Also suggestive of this foreign migration into Hollywood's 2007 Oscar ceremony is that American icon Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima*, nominated for best picture and best director this year, is primarily a Japanese-language film.

Certainly the modern world has grown smaller and more familiar in many ways, and the allure of exotic populations and locales, such as the Mongolian landscapes in *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), still aims to tap the traditional curiosity of movie audiences about other places and peoples. But the increasingly accented cinema seen in America has other, more concrete forces behind it.

BIRTH OF AN INTERNATIONAL MARKET

However distinctive and visible this year's array of foreign films in the United States, America's complicated relationship with other film cultures is hardly new. Since the first public projection of movies in France in 1895, a key dynamic in film history has been the showdowns



Clint Eastwood's *Letters from Iwo Jima* was not categorized as a foreign-language film, despite being primarily in Japanese.

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and negotiations between the U.S. movie culture and overseas production companies and theater markets. The establishment of the Motion Pictures Patents Company in 1908, under the leadership of Thomas Edison (American inventor of the motion picture camera), aimed explicitly to limit the distribution of foreign films in the United

studios on the American marketplace. As a result, through the 1950s and early 1960s, both independent U.S. productions and, eventually, foreign films started to make their way into U.S. theaters. Led by films from Sweden's Ingmar Bergman, France's Francois Truffaut, and Italy's Michelangelo Antonioni among many others, this new wave of foreign films appealed especially to an emerging demographic of youth and academic audiences curious about other cultures, but over the next several decades interest spread through an expanding population of U.S. audiences.

The postwar trends in the global expansion of Hollywood's market and the subsequent growing ubiquity and popularity of international cinema in America have today assumed their own specific economic and technological rationale and shapes. Most importantly perhaps, the contemporary explosion of international film festivals has been one of the most visible engines in announcing and supporting foreign films to an international market, most notably for the highly lucrative American theater and DVD (digital video disc) circuits.

The first film festival, the still influential Venice Film Festival, began in 1932, and today, from Cannes and

States. Later, in the wake of World War I and with the American movie industry's growing world dominance, Hollywood globalization would reach into a floundering German economy to create the 1926 Parufamet Agreement. American film studios Paramount and MGM and the German studio Ufa agreed not only to allow Hollywood access to the German exhibition markets but also to open the door for German talent to immigrate to the United States (including *Casablanca* director Michael Curtiz and Swedish star Greta Garbo).

As America's cultural expansion grew after World War II, the Paramount Decrees of 1948 laid a foundation that would gradually but profoundly alter the direction

of American movie culture and lead to the international film scene today. These decrees effectively broke up the monopolistic hold of the major Hollywood



An international audience gathers for the film festival in Locarno, Switzerland.

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A scene from Michael Curtiz's classic film, *Casablanca*.

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Berlin to Toronto and Telluride (Colorado), the festival circuit offers anywhere from 400 to 1,000 events in cities around the world, where films such as *Life Is Beautiful* (1998) from Italy and *Run Lola Run* (1998) from Germany are catapulted into world markets after receiving awards at these festivals. Just as the original Venice festival aimed to promote its own and other national cultures through films, festivals today frequently act as conduits for offering insights into cultures outside national cinemas and Hollywood, become barometers for worldwide critical



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Crowds line up to see some of the films of the Toronto Film Festival.

attention, and at the same time often attract funding and distribution for smaller, more creative films.

Contemporary Iranian and Korean cinema are a case in point. With little support or popularity at home, Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*, the 1997 Grand Prize winner at Cannes, led a spate of contemporary Iranian films into Europe and the United States. After Park Chan-wook's *Old Boy* (2003), a wildly successful example of "Asian extreme cinema," garnered numerous awards from festivals in Hong Kong, Cannes, and Stockholm, the film not only found art-house distribution in the United States but landed Park in the *New York Times* magazine. Thanks to festival recognition, Hou Hsiao-hsien's films (such as 1993's *The Puppetmaster* and 1998's *Flowers of Shanghai*) found financial support and thus visibility in the United States, and when Walter Salles's Brazilian film *Central Station* (1998) won a prize at the Sundance Film Festival, its future in America suddenly became brighter.

CULTIVATING AUDIENCES

Related to these new sources for exposure and word-of-mouth promotion is a second important factor in contemporary migration of foreign films to the United States: namely, since 1990, the growing popularity and profitability of the so-called New Independent Cinema and the ability of films from overseas to, in a sense, ride the coattails of this movement. Fostered by distribution (and later production) companies such as Miramax, films by Quentin Tarantino and Jim Jarmusch offered audiences stories and styles different from many of the tired Hollywood formulas, and as this taste for the offbeat, distinctive, and new grew through the 1990s, these companies learned to seek out (usually through the festival circuit), to import, and sometimes to repackage foreign films that would be aimed at specially targeted audiences. Films like *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Il Postino* (1994) set new box-office records for foreign films in U.S. markets. *The Crying Game* offered a paradigm for a promotional campaign that turned a moderately successful British film about an IRA terrorist into a U.S. mini-blockbuster about sex and secrets.

Following the success of companies like Miramax, the major U.S. studios have, not surprisingly, created (or re-created) their own "specialty film divisions" to both discover and distribute independent and foreign films. One such division, for example, Sony Pictures Classics, currently distributes Zhang Yimou's romantic martial arts film *House of the Flying Daggers* (2004), Pedro Almodovar's offbeat Spanish suspense film *Volver* (2006), and Michael Haneke's French/Austrian/German thriller *Caché* (2005). Another company, Fox Searchlight (parented by 20th Century Fox), offers highly successful British imports like *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006).

Both as a product and a creator of these trends, contemporary movies are more and more coproduced by a variety of international companies, with each investment potentially promising a wider distribution around the world and in the United States. Hardly a new practice, coproduction frequently offers U.S. companies involvement in foreign movies from the ground up and often assures an English-language release in the United States. Like the Parufamet Agreement of 1926, coproductions and financing encourage shared directors, producers, technicians, and stars like Roberto Begnini, Ang Lee, Guillermo del Toro, Rutger Hauer, Penelope Cruz, and Michael Ballhaus. And with this cross-fertilization of personnel comes more and more blending

of genres and plots, easily recognized, if not as exclusively American, at least as “international” in a sense that accommodates American tastes—such as Luc Besson’s *La Femme Nikita* (1990), a fast-action crime thriller.

This is not to say, I’d insist, that recent movies from overseas have simply adapted to American genres. On the contrary, at least as important is how other national cinemas have offered American audiences new kinds of stories and characters outside the formulas of Hollywood. It is hard to imagine the Oscar-winning *Crash* (2005) or its critical reception without Iñárritu’s far more daring precedent *Amores perros* (2000).



Netflix distributes DVDs through the mail, revolutionizing home video access.

DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION

A final and particularly contemporary factor in the accenting of American cinema is the digital convergence of film production and distribution. With the now and future digital revolution at hand, the freedoms and openings once offered by home-video distribution in the 1970s and 1980s are now being translated into the new opportunities of contemporary DVD and Internet distribution. While video and DVD sales long ago surpassed theatrical ticket sales, what often gets overlooked in this shift is how the video and DVD market allowed a more targetable and more open market for the distribution of foreign films. If most foreign films are rarely seen theatrically (except in the very limited art-house circuit), the expansion of home video through the



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It is now possible to watch a film on a mobile phone.

expansion of DVD technology makes more and more foreign films available to all audiences and, perhaps more significantly, allows distributors to target DVDs to local communities with particular interests in, for instance, Asian, European, or African cinema.

Indian cinema, the films of “Bollywood,” is an especially powerful example. *Bride and Prejudice*, an Indian remake of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, might be seen in alternative cinemas around the country in 2004, and Mira Nair’s recent films, including *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), have distinguished themselves critically and economically in the United States during the past 15 years. Yet it is the more-or-less open and continual access to a potentially unlimited variety of Indian, and other foreign, films through neighborhood and on-line video rentals that assures an accented chatter about films in America. With subscription services like Netflix providing an even easier and globally wider choice of films, which the inevitable Internet downloading of films will only facilitate in the near future, it’s difficult to resist today the romantic and utopian tendency to see again, as in 1895, the movies as, if not the universal language of Esperanto, perhaps a multilanguage dialogue in our homes and communities. ■

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