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Between "National" and "Transnational": Film Diffusion as World Politics

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This article explores three modes of film diffusion (markets, festivals, and "alter-routes" facilitated by new technologies) and argues that despite significant lowering of barriers to cultural trade, films are often subject to structural and ideational firewalls linked to the state. Thus, political effects of cultural flows—and of the imaginaries they foster—remain highly contested and fundamentally uncertain.

"Cultural turn" in international relations (IR) scholarship has opened space for the examination of the role of popular culture in world politics and led to recognition that it can provide important and meaningful frameworks for interpretation of state actions. However, the burgeoning literature on film, TV, and other forms of visual culture,[1] which has significantly expanded the hermeneutic scope of IR, has generally paid more attention to the politics of representation and the way in which cultural products interact with the state than to mechanisms by which they are diffused across national or regional boundaries.[2]

And yet, films belong to the category of the most widely diffused and genuinely transnational cultural products. The scale of their distribution and visibility of their movement across the globe make them into some of the most easily observable cultural commodities in worldwide circulation. Not surprisingly, films—and Hollywood in particular—have often figured as prominent examples in popular and political discussions about globalization and its cultural consequences. It is therefore plausible to view films—and heated debates about their movements around the world—as proxies for cross-border diffusion of culture, norms, and identities.

In this article, I analyze three modes of film diffusion and argue that despite significant lowering of barriers to cultural trade, powerful structural firewalls (state protectionism, market structure, intellectual-property regimes) remain in place. Films are also subject to ideational firewalls: They are often adopted or rejected in global markets/festivals/households on the basis of their national origin and/or interpreted as carriers of national narratives. But can these firewalls be turned into bridges? Can cinema create a transnational culture? What are the audience reactions to global diffusion of cultural products? These, I suggest, are the critical—yet open—questions to which IR scholarship on popular culture should pay more attention in the future. For studying diffusion of cultural products—and their effects—could not only be an important addition to the existing

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[1] See, for instance, Weldes (1999, 2003) Der Derian (2001, 2010), Lipschutz (2001), Weber (2001), Nexon and Neumann (2006), Shapiro (2009), Buzan (2010), Drezner (2011).

[2] Notable exceptions are Goff (2006) and Flibbert (2007), who used Hollywood as the example of interplay between identities and interests in global trade politics, and particularly Seybert, Nelson, and Katzenstein (2013), whose paper relies on film diffusion as the paradigmatic case of *circulatory power* and *uncertainty* in international relations.

research on IR and popular culture, but it could also enable us to delineate the structural and ideational horizons of contemporary transnational politics.

What Is Being Diffused?

Ample historical evidence demonstrates that films have always been transnationally diffused products. Just like other norms and practices, film technology (industrial and business practices, artistic and aesthetic influences) diffuses through a combination of competition, coercion, learning, and emulation (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006). At the turn of the twentieth century, Thomas Alva Edison in the United States and the brothers Lumière in France engaged in a feverish competition to develop motion picture technology. Eventually, they both lost to a group of young and brazen Jewish-American immigrants who had escaped to California to hide from the Edison Trust. The renegades created a novel industrial complex: Hollywood. Film studios, perceived as the key to Hollywood's industrial success, quickly spread around the world (Hozic 2001). In the 1920s and the 1930s, every major country in the world seemed to have built at least one—Babelsberg-UFA Studio in Berlin (arguably the oldest large-scale studio in the world, although significantly remodeled according to the new industry standards in 1926), Mosfilm in Moscow (1923), Taikatsu and Shochiko studios in Japan (1920s), Elstree and Pinewood Studios in the UK (1920s–1930s), and Cinecittà in Rome (1937). Many of them are still in operation, while the construction of new ones, thanks to the dispersion of film production, continues unabated all around the world (Goldsmith and O'Regan 2005).

Coproductions, complex transnational financing arrangements, and continuous migrations of filmmaking personnel have also been a part of the industry for decades. Hollywood has always acted as a gigantic centrifuge of global talent and a magnet for foreign capital and investment. It would be a very different place today without the influx of German filmmakers, writers, and producers in the Interwar period: East European émigrés during the Cold War; and Spanish, Latin American, and Asian actors and directors more recently. It would also be a very different—and much poorer place—had it not been for the continuous influx of foreign capital into its products and corporate structures. Conversely, many film industries around the world have benefited from Hollywood's location shooting and diffusion of its production practices—an upside to an otherwise frequently unfair new division of international cultural labor (Miller 2010; Christopherson 2013).

In this fluid environment of mobile productions and migrant talent, filmmakers have been quick to learn from each other and to acknowledge such influences in movies themselves, sometimes in most unexpected ways. The cross-fertilization has resulted in hybrid genres—Spaghetti Westerns, Hong Kong action films, Japanese monster movies, Dim Sum Westerns—and numerous film remakes. Films are rarely, if ever, made in isolation—and global film production is the best evidence of this never-ending hybridization.

Finally, films have an aesthetic/affective dimension, which enables them to move not just images across the screen or across borders but also their audiences (Carter and McCormack 2006). Movies move, writes Lesley Stern (2010), in many different ways. Their most obvious movements through space (how they circulate, how they are exported and imported, distributed and exhibited) and time (how their meanings vary over the years) are entwined with geopolitics. On the other hand, their movement is also related to aesthetics, "the capacity of films to move their viewers on a sensory and emotive level" (Stern 2010:188). The prime emotional value of films is that they can transport their audiences

into other places and other times but also reaffirm a sense of here and now. Thus, cinema has always played "a key role in the conception of national identity" but it has also "been part of aesthetic and political utopias about universal communication and international cooperation": in other words, cinema has always been situated between "national" and "transnational" (Hake 2008:1). The location (and travel) of particular films (and "national cinemas") along this continuum, as we shall see in the next section, has been defined by the creative impulses of their authors as much as by the economic and cultural patterns of film diffusion.

How Do Films Travel?

There are three principal ways in which films reach their audiences both within and beyond national boundaries: through the marketplace, through festival networks, and through less visible alternate routes (licit and illicit), facilitated by the development of new technologies (from Netflix to piracy). The first two routes have been in existence since the early 1930s and have often been regarded as alternatives to each other, thriving on the reified dichotomy of commercial Hollywood films, on the one hand, and national art cinema on the other. And, yet, they are neither incompatible nor overlapping: smaller, independent films from "minor cinematographies" often take the festival route in order to reach commercial distributors; large, spectacular Hollywood blockbusters vie for spots at prestigious film festivals in order to build critical acclaim that can aid them in competition for awards such as Oscars. But the mode of diffusion influences a film's reception, interpretations, and—eventually—its place in film history. Accolades received at Cannes may not significantly alter box office chances but they can help a film resonate in other ways: through media, academic discourse, and in political forums. Likewise, box office success may diminish a film's chances of being taken seriously: *Avatar*—the highest grossing film of all times *and* a very serious, political, antiwar movie—is, perhaps, the best recent example (Buzan 2010; Der Derian 2010).

Marketplace

Commercial distribution of films cannot be disentangled—in practice or in political/public/academic discussions about film—from Hollywood and its continued dominance in world markets. As Toby Miller and Richard Maxwell (2006:33) rightly remind us, "non-US based people of color are the world's majority filmmakers (...) yet the story of film's globalization is largely a Hollywood one." For almost a century, the US film industry has been benefitting from the combination of economies of scale in production and the so-called *cultural discount* in consumption—the degree to which cultural and linguistic differences may affect demand for cultural products in other markets (Hoskins and Mirus 1988). The size of the US domestic market and linguistic advantages over Europe (whose linguistic fragmentation became particularly noticeable after the introduction of sound film in the early 1930s) lowered the value of the cultural discount for US films and enabled Hollywood to establish itself as the world's major producer of "prefabricated daydreams" (Powdermaker 1950). It has maintained that position since the 1920s, greatly helped by corporate power: with the exception of a brief interlude during the 1960s and the early 1970s, global film markets have been controlled by a handful of Hollywood studios. Their lead in the world markets has been established, first, through the institutionalization of the so-called "studio system"—tight control over the production process and vertical integration with movie theaters, which allowed Hollywood studios to

produce more films more expeditiously than all other national film industries combined (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985)—and then, second, through dispersion of production but continued control over multiple distribution channels and horizontal integration with other cultural/entertainment industries (music, publishing, TV, tourism, digital media) (Aksoy and Robbins 1992; Hozic 2001).

Today, films are just an apex of a product/profit pyramid, which includes television, DVDs, video games, publishing, and even recycling: film stock from movies is reinvented as polyester and metals are retrieved from projectors and television sets (Miller 2010). And, in the current business model, major Hollywood distributors—not producers—effectively control the entire production process. Acting as film financiers, distributors can recoup their initial investments before the films are even made, through merchandising and pre-sales of films in multiple markets (Hozic 2001). Theatrical releases remain important, but only as trendsetters for sales of other pyramid products and/or through other venues. Since nearly 40% of box office receipts are collected in the first week of release, films are expected to make most of their money through a strong opening weekend on as many screens as possible. Given the importance of this initial push on the screens, costs of marketing and distribution of films often amount to 50% of the production costs. The size of production, marketing, and distribution budgets constitute extremely high barriers to entry into the industry and explain Hollywood's enduring oligarchic structure.

These days, it is estimated that Hollywood's share of the global box office is around 63% (*The Guardian* 2013). Industry leaders are keenly aware of the growth in their overseas markets—and particularly anxious about making their mark in China, predicted to be the world's largest film market by 2020 (Child 2012). In turn, Hollywood's earnings are increasingly dependent upon exports: the share of global markets in Hollywood's box office has increased from roughly equal to domestic revenue in 2000 to double that level in 2009 (Walls and McKenzie 2012). The shift to global markets is affecting both content choices and marketing strategies (Schuker 2010; *The Economist* 2011a). Animation, science fiction, horror, and action movies have been much better received internationally than at home. The move to international markets also explains a greater share of PG-13 movies in box office receipts than in the previous decades. More and more often, films are simultaneously released in domestic and foreign markets—adding upward pressure on marketing and advertising budgets. And yet, one cannot but wonder about the implications of these new global market considerations on American soft power. If *The Avengers* is really the best global cultural product that Hollywood can offer, what does that tell us about the image that the United States projects—and wishes to project—onto the world?

Festivals

Global festival networks represent an alternative distribution venue for films from "minor cinematographies" and/or art films. Originally established as "a very European institution" (Elsaesser 2005:84) and as an *inter*national showcase for *national* cinemas in opposition to Hollywood, film festivals are now a global phenomenon: estimates range between 1200 and 1900 annually (De Valck 2008:105). Held in cities from Sundance to Sarajevo, as aptly captured by the title of Kenneth Turan's (2003) book, film festivals come with varied agendas— geopolitical, business, and aesthetic—and cater to every niche audience group imaginable. They are branding opportunities for cities, vehicles for promotion of national film industries, incubators of new talent, building blocks of regional identities. And while they "act as multipliers and amplifiers on several levels,"

their primary function is still to "categorize, classify, sort and sift the world's annual film-production" (Elsaesser 2005).

The tension with Hollywood—although an inescapable aspect of film festivals' history—has always been somewhat feigned. The first film festival, held in Venice in 1932 in conjunction with the 18th Venice Biennale in arts, opened with a Hollywood movie and attracted Hollywood's greatest stars. The Cannes Film Festival, viewed as the world's premier staging ground for art cinema, has always had a symbiotic relation with Hollywood and has often been described as "Hollywood's licentious mistress" (De Valck 2008:15). In other festival venues around the world, festival organizers and city fathers are also well aware that the glitz and the glamour that comes along with Tinseltown's products easily translates into ticket sales, press coverage, tourism dollars, and boosts for local economies.

Thomas Elsaesser (2005) explains the growth and the spread of film festivals around the world by the confluence of two factors—the revival of urban economies via "cultural clustering" (that is, the re-birth of former industrial centers through development of cultural and symbolic industries) and the growth of, as he calls it, the "Bridget Jones economy" fueled by young, single, urban professionals who can afford to be art-savvy and culturally engaged. The "built city" has been turned into a "programmable city" filled with cyclical events, which are entered in a proper sequence and geographic order to fit in with all the other competing cities that offer similar events.

Thus, film releases are scheduled according to festival schedules, and films—along with filmmakers, actors, film critics, media—travel from one event to the other. Or, as Elsaesser (2005:87) puts it, "festivals form a cluster of consecutive international venues, to which films, directors, producers, promoters and press, in varying degrees of density and intensity, migrate like flocks of birds or a shoal of fish." Some, like Cannes, are closed to the general public; others, like Berlin or Rotterdam, are envisioned as public events par excellence. The former generate future interest in the films via awards and critical reviews; the latter also serve as invaluable sites for market research and detailed analysis of audience response. And although ostensibly opposed to market mechanisms, film festivals too act as marketplace; Marché du Film, held concurrently with the Cannes Film festival, screens nearly 6,000 films and draws twice as many participants from nearly every country in the world.

And yet, in order to sustain themselves and continue to attract their "Bridget Jones" audiences, film festivals have to rely on a reified contrast between commercial and art cinema. The contrast has been questioned both in film studies and in film practice (Galt and Schoonover 2010), but it is important to mention here because critical acclaim continues to act as the key ingredient in diffusion of non-Hollywood films. Film festivals, argues De Valck (2008:106), are zones "where films can be evaluated in terms that would not be competitive in commercial settings outside of the festival environment." Or, as Atom Egoyan (cited in Elsaesser 2005:99), acclaimed Canadian filmmaker, puts it: "our survival is not set by public taste, but by the opinion of our peers—festival programmers (. . .), art council juries, and even Telefilm."

As "triangulators" between art and finance, and a part of broader "epistemic communities" which include "critics, scholars, museum curators, film archivists, cinephiles, and film business people," festivals play a critical role in the construction of film canons. They "launch new cinemas—individual films, auteurs, traditions, and movements" through selection and award processes and "reproduce and add value to these films" by organizing retrospectives, special screenings, etc. (Wong 2011:101). And, although submissions to most festivals are no longer organized on a country-by-country basis, (geo)political considerations are often taken into account and festivals continue to constitute and (re)constitute "national cinemas."

"With special selections, such as the 'Perspective German Film' in Berlin or 'Dutch Treats' at Rotterdam," writes Elsaesser (2005:98), "festivals provide ambassadorial or extra-territorial showcases for domestic filmmakers' work." In addition, international recognition "can be fed back into national debate" providing auteurs and their works with added legitimacy. This "boomerang effect" (Keck and Sikkink 1998) by which the international festival stage creates national canons is particularly interesting in the case of "New Iranian Cinema," since many of its most acclaimed film directors do not even reside in Iran—perhaps the best example of the degree to which "national" interpretative frameworks may be disconnected from the territorial politics of the state.

Alter-Routes

Solingen (2012) warns us that careful studies of diffusion must pay particular attention to the "Vegas counterfactual"—to that which is not diffused. The bifurcated picture of the two key modes of film diffusion, and the structural and ideational firewalls contained within them obviously leave much of the global film production out of their framework. It is evident that one large category of films—commercial non-Hollywood films, from places such as Bollywood (India) or Nollywood (Nigeria)—have relatively limited chances to travel beyond their national or regional borders through these two well-established distribution channels. This is also the case with comedies (usually deemed as comprehensible only to local audiences) and other genre films that cater to domestic moviegoers. Neither commercially attractive to global (read American) distributors nor deemed to have particular artistic value for film festival organizers, such films usually seem doomed to stay put. And yet, they do often travel: through informal circuits of traveling exhibitors in Africa, with diasporic communities, smuggled along with local foods and sold in small grocery stores or, increasingly, via large Internet sellers of local products and flavors. That is how Bollywood films became popular in the Gulf States and in the Sahel, how Japanese anime acquired a cult following outside of Asia, and how Turkish TV series are now making their way into the United States.

The advent of videotapes and video recorders in the late 1970s, and then of the new digital technologies of production and reproduction in the 1990s, has profoundly transformed the institution of cinema. They led to the displacement of movie theaters as the only and primary sites of film consumption and shifted the venue for film watching in the direction of domestic space (Hansen 1993). New technologies—from DVDs to BitTorrent to streaming—are facilitating the movement of films across borders—both licit and illicit—and, just as importantly, through time. Films that would have once had great difficulty reaching audiences outside of their own national borders now percolate through vast transnational virtual spaces. Likewise, newly digitized film libraries, once allowed to physically disintegrate in inadequate archives, are giving a new lease on life to old movies, providing Hollywood majors and world filmmakers with refreshed revenue streams. Legitimate Internet and DVD providers (such as Amazon and Netflix in the United States, LoveFilm in the UK, VideoFutur in France, Maxdome in Germany) include vast collections of classic and foreign movies while millions of viewers—all around the globe—are downloading licit and illicit versions of films or swapping them through peer-to-peer networks. Films are also reaching different categories of viewers—particularly in developing countries, where movie theaters may have previously been limited to major cities. As a result, there are more and more movies in circulation, with audiences more in command over their own video choices than ever before.

The effects of these changes are not easy to establish due to fragmented viewership and lack of data. There are no reliable figures on movie piracy since the

research has been mostly industry-driven and "embedded in a lobbying effort with a very loose relationship to evidence" (Karaganis 2011:4). Companies like Netflix and Amazon are carefully guarding their own audience statistics and turning them into business advantages—Netflix' move into production of its own series has been driven by skillful analysis of its audiences patterns (particularly so-called "binge viewing" of TV series and the popularity of particular shows on "replay"). Europeans fear the concentration of Internet servers in the United States and try to factor that into free-trade negotiations. The most convincing analyses of the effects that this liberal—if often illicit—movement of audiovisual goods may have had beyond national or regional borders are ethnographic studies focused on diasporas, which tend to show that films and videos now serve as critically important identity-building tools akin to the role once played by literature (Ayata 2011).

Firewalls and Outcomes

Each diffusion path described above has its own firewalls, transforming the fluid transnational spaces through which films flow into ordered, hierarchical national territories easily recognizable by IR scholars. First, states continue to rely on a combination of protectionism and subsidies to protect domestic film markets and prop up their own film industries. China, for instance, has strict quotas on the number of foreign films in theatrical releases but much more relaxed ones on video releases. The discrepancy may be one of the causes of rampant piracy (Wang and Zhu 2003). France continues to insist on the relevance of *exception culturelle* in free trade, even as its government trims the budget for the arts because of the financial crisis. Iran had for years prohibited the import of VCRs as a way of maintaining strict control over circulation of images. It also strictly censors film production within the country, one of the main reasons why many of Iran's most acclaimed filmmakers live in exile. Local content quotas are also in existence in countries as diverse as Australia, Canada, Greece, Brazil, and Indonesia. Israel has restrictions on advertising. Singapore limits the use of satellite dishes. Russia is considering new measures to safeguard its cultural and political markets. The United States has its own firewalls, even if protection and subsidies are less obviously tied to its government. The structure of the US theatrical market acts as a firewall for diffusion of non-English language films (both in the United States and, thanks to the long reach of US distributors, in many overseas countries). In addition, although Hollywood's success is usually ascribed to its "free-market efficiency and narrative transparency," it has never shied away from state protection. Indeed, "the US government has devoted massive resources to generate 'private-sector' film in the interests of ideology and money, and the industry has responded in commercial and ideological kind" (Miller and Maxwell 2006:41).

Second, if states and corporate power determine the flow of films through theatrical markets, then it is the critics, and the juries, and the press, and the "Bridget Jones" publics in Berlin, Sundance, Sarajevo, Rotterdam, or Pusan that will determine a possible global trajectory for smaller, "minor," national cinemas. For all their diversity, film festivals too rely on sets of aesthetic conventions—but also reputational markers—which tend to replicate the political, racial, and gendered hierarchies of the international system. Despite their relative openness to "other" cinematographies, few African films have won awards in international festivals, while at Cannes, Jane Campion remains the only woman thus far to have won the prestigious Palme d'Or.

Finally, as another manifestation of the confluence between the state and the film industry, the battle over movie piracy and copyright protection is mostly led

by the US government and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the lobbying arm of the Hollywood studios. The industry has been historically nervous about any new distribution venue that it could not directly control—from television to Internet. Jack Valenti, long-time chair of the MPAA famously compared the video recorder to a serial killer (Karaganis 2011:66). Since the advent of VCRs, the MPAA has fought against technologies of duplication and consumers' right to copy, criminalizing such acts while ignoring evidence which suggested that "piracy has forms of fair use in areas where traditional forms of distribution/exhibition result in market failure" (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, and Wang 2005:256). In particular, studies have shown that the practice of staggered international movie releases may no longer work in this time of instantaneous technology transfers (Danaher and Waldfogel 2012) and that pricing policies of optical disks and theater tickets are often completely out of line with the purchasing power of local consumers (*The Economist* 2011b). An SSRC-led project on movie piracy produced a number of cases, which demonstrated that "the superiority of the informal sector as a distribution channel has led legal distributors to try to adopt its methods and approach its price points" (Karaganis 2011:64). Only recently has the US film industry begun to acknowledge that piracy may also be a result of unmet demand and/or another possible access to markets from which it is otherwise shunned. Nonetheless, as Miller et al. (2005:255) have argued, the war on piracy serves as a clear sign that "as the Internet and digital duplication continue to disarticulate the geographic sensitivities of MPAA, regulation and enforcement policies struggle to recapitulate the spatial imperative of corporate capital."

In all these cases, the firewalls are not just structural but also ideational. Films—and culture—are excellent tools in symbolic power battles over national identity (that often fly in the face of complex transnational realities of film production and distribution). Recognizing "the decline of national sovereignty as a regulatory force in global coexistence" (Ezra and Rowden 2006:1), film scholars have noted the need to problematize the categories of film canon and national cinema. However, "the twin concepts of national cinemas and canonical great works continue to provide some of the primary ways we teach, study, and understand film history" (Czach 2004). Transnational (Shohat and Stam 2003; Ezra and Rowden 2006), postnational (Elsaesser 2005), or world cinema (Durovicová and Newman, 2010)—new categories, which are being promoted as "the new virtue terms of film studies" (Hjort 2010)—only further prove the degree to which categories of classification are never neutral while existing concepts may be too sticky to replace. Even in Europe, where a conscious effort has been made to create "transnational identities"—with film as one of its cornerstones—"national cinema" remains a powerful organizing principle of interpretation and a marketing tool. The fears of "Europudding" films (Galt 2006) seem to parallel the rise of the "marble-cake identities" within the European Union (Risse 2004), while new generations of filmmakers, especially in Eastern Europe, continue to create *new* national cinemas in an effort to brand and differentiate their festival/art products from all others (Elsaesser 2005).

Conclusion

For more than a century, filmmakers all over the world have been contributing to the creation of a rich visual language, which has traversed political and cultural borders and allowed audiences in different cultural settings to draw their own meanings from the movies. Yet, no matter how easily cultural goods—films in particular—may travel across borders, the impact of their diffusion is still often, to use Richard Rosecrance's term from this issue, *truncated* by the

structural and ideational firewalls linked to the state. Thus, political effects of cultural flows—and of the imaginaries they foster—remain highly contested. Scholars like Samuel Huntington (1999) firmly believed that "little or no evidence exists (...) to support the assumption that the emergence of pervasive global communications is producing significant convergence in attitudes and beliefs." Governments fearing intrusions of foreign culture(s) and investing in costly trade battles and protectionist measures seem to think otherwise. While IR scholarship has acknowledged the power of popular culture to help us interpret state actions—particularly that of the United States—it still seems easier to accept that "aesthetic power" may be relevant to the state (Steele 2010) than to believe that it can alter the international system as such. And so, as the recent Seybert et al. (2013) article about film diffusion shows, the outcomes of *circulatory power* on international affairs are highly *uncertain*. We need more careful and contextualized studies of cultural diffusion and, particularly, of audience reception to assess its effects on international politics. The recent move toward studies of affect and emotion in international politics may be a good start (Connolly 2002; Carter and McCormack 2006; Bleiker and Hutchinson 2008). If there is a cautionary lesson to be learned from the brief analysis presented here, it is that circulation of goods alone may not be sufficient to transform political horizons as long as the institutions *and* interpretative frameworks through which they are filtered remain the same.

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