

Analysis of cultural imperialism with hollywood films media essay



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With the rising of electronic media, in the 1960s scholar Marshall McLuhan raised the notion of ' global village', which provides a common platform of random communication without physical and geography distance for worldwide people. In this perspective, this kind of information circumstance will enforce everyone globally to be the participant of, and struggle for a same strategy, because we are inevitably connected with each other (McLuhan and Quentin, 1967). In the rest years of twentieth century, with the assistant of advanced technology and high-developing economy^¼the whole world seems to increasingly move forwards to the " global village" in nature. The concept of globalization, to some extent, already gradually rooted in people's mind. In the process of globalization, in generally, two primary constituent parts cannot be neglected. One is the distance between time, space and place has shrunk (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1990; Rantanen, 2005), which is owing to the technological advances, such as electronic media, instantaneous communication that enable people to realize interaction over the boundaries of country and time, which is also the precondition of the realization of globalization. In this sense, the global communication systems prompt the instant currency of capital and offer possibility for the expansion of production and marketing strategies. The other one concerns the content of the communication. With the help of telecommunication technology, the diffusion of media products have surpassed the country border. By the way of music, press issues, films and broadcast channels, the images, thoughts, and sounds of different cultures are mutually flowing among a vast network of people in the worldwide sphere. For this, the project of globalization refers to the communication and incorporation of culture from different areas. In addition, the globalization of <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-cultural-imperialism-with-hollywood-films-media-essay/>

mass media, especially, aims to the content of cultural products can be obtained globally (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003). In this sense, confronting the problem of the promise and reality of media globalization, researchers respectively hold different viewpoints. Among these debates, an important discourse called ‘cultural imperialism’, which is resulted from the worry of the inequality of global media ownership, control consumption and content, should be highlighted. A number of scholars, because of the superiority of Western media products on the consumption marketing, claim that media globalization equals ‘cultural imperialism’, and convey deep concerns with globally cultural homogenization and standardization. Especially, accompanied by the globally prevailing consumerism, traditionally national cultures of each country all have the possibility of being unified into a common global commercial culture system. The most typical evidence is the export of American cultural goods in the range of whole world. As we can see, Coca-Cola, IBM, Levis’, and Hollywood films, these global brands are all produced by the U. S.. However, there are still a part of socialists understandably suspect the discourse of ‘cultural imperialism’ on the concept of culture and the confusion of cultural goods and ideological effects (Tomlinson, 1999).

On the Basis of the controversy over the discourse of ‘cultural imperialism’, in this essay, I intend to through the analysis of concrete and weighted American media product-Hollywood films, research whether so-called ‘cultural imperialism’ can work under the condition of consumerist culture, which appeared as the key representation of cultural homogenization. The focus of part 1 is the literature review of the details of ‘cultural imperialism’,

which involving its original definition, critique and impacts. Based on the theoretical analysis of 'cultural imperialism' in part1, the next section will associate with specific data and text analysis, to examine the relative statement of 'cultural imperialism'. In the last part, I will point out my own discussion over the 'cultural imperialism', and conclude the limitation.

The Discourse of 'Cultural Imperialism'

Before moving to the main argument of this paper, it is necessary to define the notion of 'cultural imperialism'. As early as the first decade of the nineteenth century, Lenin suggested the concept of imperialism. In his perspective, the term of imperialism was closely linked with economy, and we can regard it as the highest form of capitalism. (Lenin, 1939). He pointed that at this level of capitalism, imperialism appeared as a process that big conglomerates incorporate smaller enterprises for the further profits, and moreover, this kind of operation could surpass the national boundaries. In addition, this sort of economic conduction is between the major capitalist nations, and it will result in specific imperialist patterns of domination. In this sense, Maybe 'cultural imperialism' is one consequence of the specific imperialist patterns of domination Lenin said. Williams (1983) also has more further viewpoint towards the concept of imperialism. As for Williams, he concludes imperialism as:

... Like any word which refers to fundamental social and political conflicts, cannot be reduced, semantically, to a single proper meaning. Its important historical and contemporary variations of meanings point to real processes which have to be studied in their own terms (p. 160).

Additionally, he even particularly generalized the development of imperialism into two categories, politically and economically. Relating with this paper, the economic category is worth being mentioned. As Williams argued, this process originated from Marxist analysis of the development of modern capitalism, which is similar as Lenin's argument. As a result, combining current modern capitalism statement with the characteristic of imperialism, Williams claimed, imperialism in contemporary context is applied to the practices of US and Soviet Union. However, 'American imperialism' refers to a primarily economic denomination associated with the global reach of capitalism but not having the political form of 'colonialism' (John, 1991). As a result, with the post-war non-colonial process since the 1960s and the development of contemporary capitalism, the analysis of new imperialism has emerged among academic circle, which considered that, in the new international settings, the imperialist expansion strategy has moved primarily from military aggression and directly colonial domination to economic and cultural penetration, in which, the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' is a significant and critical theory of cultural globalization.

About the concept of 'cultural imperialism', there are existing different versions. The earliest systematic one was given by Herbert Schiller. Furthermore, Tunstall(1977) crystalized the definition of 'cultural imperialism' as:

The cultural imperialism thesis claims that authentic, traditional and local culture in many arts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products mainly from the United States.

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In this sense, it is clear that the process of 'cultural imperialism' is operated by the products import of majority capitalist countries (mainly the U. S. A.), primarily media products. In this sense, non-Marxists prefer to see 'cultural imperialism' as 'media imperialism'. If that, the discourse of cultural imperialism can be approached on the sphere of media, which turns to the empirical territory instead of theoretical assumptions (Chin-Chuan Lee, 1979). Similar as Lee's account of 'media imperialism', Oliver Boyd Barrett (1977) defines 'media imperialism' as:

The process whereby the ownership, structure distribution or content of the media in any one country is subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries- without proportional reciprocation of influence by the country so affected (p. 116).

He also suggests four 'modes of media imperialism': 1) the shape of the communication vehicle 2) a set of industrial arrangements 3) a body of values 4) media content, which could exert the cultural dominance instead of direct economic relationship. David Croteau and William Hoynes (2003) proposed more detailed connection and explanation of Boyd-Barrett's statement. First of all, they claims that the linkage between cultural imperialism and media imperialism is because of the media products, which from Western side, especially America, intensely impact other regions' culture, almost have reached the level of cultural domination. Here, it refers to the relation of media ownership and media content. According to the theory of media imperialism, both values and ideology of Western society are embedded in the media products sold on the interests of Western corporations. Next, Croteau and Hoynes (2003) in their book 'Media/Society' <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-cultural-imperialism-with-hollywood-films-media-essay/>

also cite Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to explain the concept and significance of 'cultural hegemony', and sociologist Stuart Hall's analysis of how mass media institutions mix with this conception of hegemony. The conception of Gramsci's (1971) hegemony is connecting all culture, power, and ideology together. In his perspective, besides military force, power can be obtained by the way of cultural and ideological domination as well. For this direction, the key strategy is to create consent, which can be realized through a kind of 'cultural hegemony'. Croteau and Hoynes said that 'consent is something that is won' ruling groups in a society actively seek to have their worldview accepted by all members of society as the universal way of thinking' (p. 166). In this sense, schools, religion, and media naturally become the sites where help the dominant class approach this kind of hegemony, due to these institutions are the places where we form the ways of thinking. On this basis, Hall(1982) suggested that mass media is the main site where the cultural hegemony is exercised, because media images are not merely reflecting the world, but representing the world, and could actively make things have meanings. And then, associating with media ownership and commercial profits, many scholars argue that media is principally on the behalf of the dominant assumptions, and applying the universal views of the world that most people know. With the development of the globalization of mass media, this conception is more convincing. For example, because of the motive of media globalization is commercial interests, plus the economic distance among different countries, the inequality of media globalization is inevitable and obvious. The growth of centralized media conglomerates will result in a concentrated global media industry. And additionally, the ownership of these global media firms are still

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in the hands of a few advanced developed countries, which also dominate the production of global media products.

As a result, from this respect, major researchers are likely to connect the elite status of Western media products with 'cultural imperialism'. The most typical one should be the impact of American media items globally. Coca-Cola, the products of Disney series, McDonald, Hollywood movies, and so forth American products are all prevailing across the world because of the propaganda of American mass media. The supporters of 'cultural imperialism' claims that these foreign imports will threaten and even dominate the local culture. (Coteau and Hoynes, 2003). For instance, according to the data of Ministry of Culture and Communication in 2001, American films occupy 54% to 92% of the performing movie in theaters in countries of the European Union, in contrast, European films make up only 3% of films shown in the United States (Ministry of culture and Communication, 2001). Schiller (1992) also from the television program export to describe the high level of American media domination globally. He indicated that 'commercial television has become an important and flourishing national export' (p. 129). He also quoted the former official of United States Information Agency Woilson P. Dizard's (1964) words to prove this point, who said that 'today, overseas sales account for 60 percent of all U. S. telefilm syndication activities and represent the difference between profit and loss for the entire industry' (p. 58). Besides, in 1967, Dizard reported that 'the amount of [TV commercial] exports, now approaching \$100 million a year, is such that the television screen is becoming the main source of the "American image" for increasing millions of people abroad'

(1967, p. 59). From all these data, it is clear that American media industry, to a large extent, is relying on foreign markets, and its impact of media products is intensifying. Associating with Hall's analysis of mass media and culture, through media products to diffuse Western values and ideology seems sensible. The discourse of 'cultural imperialism' looks like could be used to describe one phenomenon of cultural globalization, which through exporting media products to diffuse own country's values and ideology, in order to the last culture domination.

However, there are partial scholars who don't agree with this discourse of 'cultural imperialism' or 'media imperialism'. The main critic of the discourse of 'cultural imperialism'-John Tomlinson, provided a comprehensive critique pinpointing each part of cultural imperialism. Schiller's theory of 'cultural imperialism' focuses on the media, and from economic and political perspective to view the unequal structure of global cultural production and distribution. For this, Tomlinson (1991) argues that there are two mistakes underlying in this theory. First, though media is an important component of culture, it can not substitute all aspects of culture, and its impact on indigenous culture is closely connected with local audiences' understanding and individual experience of media products. Secondly, Tomlinson argues that it is a kind of exaggeration to attribute the overwhelming significance of 'cultural imperialism' to the media. It is problematic to equate cultural imperialism with 'media imperialism'. All these studies are very helpful in the depiction of the discourse of 'cultural imperialism', either proponent or sceptic. In next part, I will combine the specific media text-American

Hollywood films, to analyze the expression of 'cultural imperialism' on the basis of American primarily cultural values.

Hollywood Films

Like I mentioned in last section, media products are an effective way to diffuse certain values and ideology, consequently, realizing the purpose of cultural domination. In this respect, in order to analyze the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' through the dissection of one concrete media text, it is inevitable to mention what kind of values or ideological theory is implied in that media text, and these ideas is serving for whose benefits. Undoubtedly, in recent decades, the United States of America through its powerful economic and technological strength, its cultural perpetrator to the less advanced countries is apparent, either material products or spiritually cultural products and social political values. For example, the standard American icons-Mickey Mouse, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Hollywood are typical evidences. Then, what American values have been propagated through these popular issues? In general, white people's traditional culture is the leading culture in America, what is also called 'WASP' culture (White Angle-Saxon Protestant Culture) (Kennedy, 2001. p. 913). American main stream culture actually is the 'special mixture of Christianity, Capitalism and democracy' (translated from: Majie Zhu, 2003). Contemporary Hollywood films can, to some extent, through this specially cultural value, gain the market and extraordinary box office receipts, and subsequently, become the key approach for the expansion and penetration of culture imperialism.

Individualism as the cultural value originated from the thinking of European burgeoning bourgeoisie, which was used to oppose the autocracy feudal aristocracy during the renaissance. The early North American Puritan as same as the reason for getting rid of the European religion oppression migrated to America. And then, in American 'The Declaration of Independence', some 'self-evident truth' is included, 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' (Tefferson and Fink, 2002, p. 21-23). In American people's thought, individual liberty is the final purpose, and society just the channel to reach this aim. In addition, Americans advocate surpass others by own effort, against any kind of inference to personal liberty from country or society. In short, individualism, is 'I will take responsibility of every thing by myself'. In 1998, when American president Clinton visited China, he has said that the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, free from government interference to express different views and the right of free faith, are the central idea of the founding of the United states. And this is also the thought that leaded Americans from one side of continent to another side, and finally stand on the top of the world , and so far, American people still value it as a precious thinking (translated from: Zheng Yuan, 1998). In this respect, individualism is the main motive stimulating not only American constant innovation, but also the reckless expansion with the indifference of other countries' interests. On the basis of above introduction of several American mainstream values, it is timing to associate it with the analysis of concrete Hollywood films to research the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' in American way.

The classic film- 'Forrest Gump' in 1995, ever gained the Best Film Reward of Oscar Award. Through the picture of the life of retarded Gump, we can get in touch with many aspects of American social life. This film was adapted from the same named novel of Winston Groom. The original book is fantastic fiction filling with ironic senses, however, the film has decorated and beautified the whole story. The original fantastic and ironic meaning have been removed, and the rebellious fighting spirit was sacrificed as well. Gump in the film has been shaped as an idealized American 'civilian hero', who has noble morality, and his way of earning life and pursuing happiness is on the effort to glorify America. The role of Gump in film, can be seen as the representative figure of American individualism, and this image is advocated by American society, which can be testified from the scene that Gump is endowed of congress badge. Another instance is the extremely costing Hollywood war film- 'Saving Private Ryan', which is an propaganda of American individualism. The whole story is processing along with the group rescue of individual life. This theme matches the Jewish traditional principle in the film 'Schindler's list'- 'he who saves one life saves the world entire'. Additionally, Hollywood films always put the mission of saving all the world on the shoulder of an individual. In the film 'Air Force One', the image of American President Tim Marshall is a good example. For protecting own country's people and reputation, he insists on not compromising over the terrorists. In the condition of utter helplessness, by the familiar with each precise device of 'Air Force One', Marshall struggled with those terrorists by himself, and finally, realized the promise of 'zero-tolerance' and 'save the world' (lines in the film 'Air Force One', 1997). Within this film, American President is eager to expand the liberal-democracy, the Christian faith and

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the concept of American family to global people. However, in realistic life, this kind of omnipotent heroism is merely a myth. What anti-terrorism really need is the cooperation of all the nations, which has been proved through the fact of Somali Piracy event in April, 2009.

Another film 'Babel' in 2006 provides another angle to view 'cultural imperialism' in Hollywood film. An accidental gun shooting event leads to the whole plots in the next story. Western people in this film enact rare indecision when they are encountering accident, which seems to lose the traditional image of the leadership globally. However, it cannot say that Hollywood films give up to play the role as an assistant of undertaking American cultural imperialism. One made-up clip story in the film that American tourists get innocent attacked, is bringing the color of cultural imperialism seemingly, because we can see the scene in the way that it tells the immense audiences that terrorism is prevailing in East as well, and Americans in this turn are becoming innocent victims. Although the director of this film attempts to utilize a large number of Eastern images to cover the hegemony of American cultural imperialism, the propagated American universalism and human right have been performed obviously. Furthermore, another kind of Hollywood films should be paid attention in particularly- Hollywood cartoon, some of which are coated by Chinese traditional culture. The film 'Mulan' presented by Disney corporation was adapted from Chinese folktale. The protagonist Mulan made her promise to resist outside invasion, and protect family reputation, which looks as if expressed Chinese traditional loyalty and filiality. But, the role of Mulan enacted in the film is independent and pursuing the confirmation of self-value and the sexual equality, which is

against the original Chinese convention. Additionally, her intensive desire of individual happiness and freedom are all representing the individualism of America. And as same as the elements of 'KungFu Panda' presented by Dreamwork, which are not real Chinese culture. As the first cartoon that has over hundreds million tickets sale in Chinese market, 'KungFu Panda' benefited from the outfit of Chinese culture and the inside substantive contents of Western culture. On the surface, there are plenty of Chinese culture facts in the films, such as the architecture music, martial arts, firecrackers, and Chinese food. Even many story details have precisely conformed to the relative characteristics of Chinese culture. In spite of all these work, the protagonist Po, it still a hero in the context of American culture values. The process of how he turns to legendary warrior just from a cooker is a typical instance of Americanized value. Originally, Po is a normal people, although because of an accidental opportunity he becomes the candidate of legendary warriors, he is indeed attending the selection ceremony. In another words, although his hero role is destined officially, he also follows the contest policy. This is a classic paradox logic in American culture: advocating everyone possessing equal right to be a hero, although frequently, the hero is destined. Po's success is through defeating the bad guy-Tai Lung, to gain the final hero coronation ceremony. This kind of fight between justice and evil, and the procedural of how the justice side defeats the bad side are the essence of American heroism. Po's success, simultaneously, is bringing the peace to the whole village, which as same as the line in 'Spiderman'- 'great power comes with great responsibility' (cited from the lines of the film 'Spiderman', 2002). In American individualism, the standard of being a hero is to defeat the evil power and have the sense of

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bearing huge responsibility, which consequently, might be improved into the thinking that only the supremacy of strength is equivalent with the duty of guarding the world peace. In this sense, we can see the color of 'cultural imperialism' is embedded in 'KungFu Panda'. Thus maybe we can think in this way like that the set of films such as 'Mulan' and 'KungFu Panda' are packed with Chinese culture, but actually, are the means of distributing American ideology through adaption.

Further Discussion of 'Culture Imperialism'

In contemporary global market, Hollywood movie is merely one of the popular import media products of America, but from the analysis of its underlying elements of 'culture imperialism', maybe we can consider the media products, television programs, advertisements, and music in the similar way. However, in this respect, I don't mean that the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' does make sense, or even could be totally equaled with media imperialism, because after all, it is just a researching theme raised in the background of globalization and consumerism, and the debate about it is still taking place, therefore I cannot arbitrarily suggest its character here.

What I want to do here is to use already existing facts to demonstrate that the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' to some extent in particular time and condition may be could have an effect, but with the moving of age and society, in certain environment, another possibility maybe emerge.

Among several suspicions of the possibility of 'cultural imperialism' or 'media imperialism', an important one is to oppose to mix the material media products with complicated ideology together. In other words, the sceptic

claims that the way of thinking that media products could diffuse Western values or ideology is ridiculous and doubtful, all of those analysis, such as the one above about Hollywood movie, are just assumption. In this perspective, if by some way I can prove the causal relationship between media productions and ideology or mind, the discourse of ' cultural imperialism' at least will be more convincing. I will still utilize films as the evidence. During the 1980s there were two popular film genres-action adventure and military/war films deserving research, such as the films ' Raiders of the Lost Ark', ' Romancing the Stone' and the series of ' Rombo' were all effective and classic in that age. The most historical and typical one, I think should be ' Rombo'. From the presentation time, we can know that it was after the Vietnam War and during the period of the Cold War, which represented by the United States and Soviet Union. The protagonist Rombo is a Vietnam Veteran, his mission is to return to Vietnam for rescuing American prisoners who have been abandoned by the U. S. government. And the common ending of this series of films was that the protagonist won the final victory and he become the hero in audiences' mind. Following the story of these films, American people as if return to the battle of Vietnam War, but in this battle there are no vanquish and shame any more, American soldier will always be the victor. A part of scholars analyzed that these films could be seen as one political approach of Regan's presidency, which was helpful to re-shape national image and regain national conviction. And actually, in the late 1980s, American people indeed overcame the so-called ' Vietnam syndrome', which was the subsequence of American failure of Vietnam War (Croteau and Hoynes. 2003). From this example, we can see that there actually exists some relation between media texts and people's way of

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thinking. So in this sense, the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' maybe really can have an effect. However, the analysis of media texts is a plural item, which should be connected with special time and conditions, because of media texts are made under special historic background and people. We also cannot use one example to explain all the other terms. Additionally, the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' was raised under the context of global culture, which maybe impact on global people, who have different religion, education, national culture and ideology, the possibility of their reactions over a media text are so hard to define. As a result, the relation between media texts and ideology maybe exist, but it is hard to say when put it in the global environment, then, don't even say the realization of 'cultural imperialism'. Tunstall (1977) also claims that there are at least two problems on the discourse of 'cultural imperialism' of America. Firstly, the precondition of 'cultural imperialism' is the superiority of Western countries on the aspect of media product market share, especially the United States of America, but the researchers thinks that with the economic and technologic development globally, other countries will rapidly create local media products, which would substitute the dependance on exporting American media products. Secondly, Tunstall said that the range of media is fairly wild, we cannot only concentrate on the popular American media products to analysis its impact of global culture. And in the aspect of some media forms, such as music, the tendency of globally incorporation is ongoing. If another media texts develop in the same way, the possibility of cultural imperialism will reduce. In addition, the debate of central status of media of cultural imperialism, like what Tomlinson said above, it is incorrect to make media equal culture. The term of culture is a complex to be clearly

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explain, and add the different way of understanding in different places, Western countries' intention of conducting culture penetration or invasion is not a simple progress.

Conclusion

Combining all the supporting points and scepticism of the discourse of cultural imperialism together, maybe we can conclude this debate in this way, firstly, we should consider the wholly global society condition and the detailed situation of relative areas. As what Tunstall (1977) suggested, the arise of the media products is just an assumption so far, it still needs the time to testify. According to the current condition of global media distribution market, the diffusion range and impact of Western media products is considerable, so if in this respect to argue the discourse of 'cultural imperialism', it indeed exists the possibility. Secondly, confronting a number of differences between culture and nations, for the pursuit of commercial benefit, the big media corporations has start making relevant policy to remove the obstacles. For example, some media producers will invite global superstar to propagate their products, and another way is to apply the resources within local culture, and decorate the products to coherent to the local character, in fact, the global expansion of American advertising agency is a good example. Actually, to a large extent, the popularity of American products is the direct consequence of American transnational advertising. The central office in the U. S. A firstly send the advertisement mode to the relevant branch agencies around the world sphere. And then on the basic of remaining the essence of original advertisement, the local agency will blend the indigenous elements into it for satisfying the regional taste and culture.

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By this way, the impact on some places is ' this country is occupied, and there is no consciousness of that' (Escobar and Anne. 1995). From this example, the threat of the discourse of ' cultural imperialism' does deserve cautions, although maybe as Tomlinson's suggestion, there is no necessity to view media as the central reference of the argument towards ' cultural imperialism', the power of it cannot be ignored, because in current consumption society, for the economic interest, the media consortiums are rolling to make any policy to break down the obstacles on the way to maximize global market share. What I suggest here is when we are facing the discourse of ' cultural imperialism', first of all, we should have a correct attitude, excessive reception and neglect are both incorrect. Especially when we are surrounded with the numerous foreign media texts, the primary thing is to recognize the innate character embedded in them, and distinguish which part of it is useful for us, and which is useless. The discourse of ' cultural imperialism' is more like a kind of trepidation in the context of globalization, researchers just around the necessity of this anxiety offer their different viewpoints, which are having different standpoints, angles, and conditions. So for the masses, what they can do is to have the cautious consciousness towards foreign media products, and depend on own values to make correct judgement.