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MEDC 5310

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7 March, 2008

### American Movies and Foreign Cultures

The Motion Picture Association of America estimates that U.S. movies made more than \$26 billion dollars at the box office worldwide in 2007. Hollywood's domination of the industry means American movies often serve as the primary window on the world for many cultures. Unfortunately, most American movies paint foreign cultures with a broad brush, reducing foreign characters to stereotypes cast for comic relief or as evil villains. American culture is almost always depicted as the "normal" culture in these movies, the culture that foreigners are either defeated by or aspire to. Ultimately, the messages American movies espouse impact America and its political and social relationships with other countries in a variety of ways.

Silverblatt defines a stereotype as "an oversimplified conception of a person, group or event," often based on a collective notion. (58) In American movies, cultural stereotypes have been used for years and cut across all genres. This paper will examine action movies, primarily the "Indiana Jones" series; the romantic comedy "My Big Fat Greek Wedding;" the drama "Blood Diamond;" and a handful of animated Disney movies, including "Aladdin."

When it comes to cultural stereotyping, action movies are some of the most egregious offenders. Foreigners are almost always villains in these movies, plotting against America and striving for world domination. Frequently, these villains are from

countries America has fought with in the past or sees as a threat at present. Germans are frequently used as villains, depicted as either ruthless Nazis in films like “Indiana Jones and Raiders of the Lost Ark” or as Cold War-era terrorists in the first “Die Hard.” In the 1980s, Russian villains were often popular, depicted as communists angry at American capitalism in movies like “Rambo II” and “Rambo III.” More recently, Americans in movies such as “Jarhead” and “The Kingdom” have fought Arab villains in countries like Saudi Arabia.

Whatever their nationality, these foreign villains are often reduced to mere caricatures, defined only by their country’s accent, cultural dress and political ideology. In “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” the German Nazis never show any human characteristics; they are ruthless and ready to kill whoever they need to in order to please Hitler. The Arabs they have recruited as their allies are equally ruthless and dehumanized; the audience rarely even sees their faces, which are hidden under scarves and turbans. Often, only the villainous master mind is named in these movies. The henchmen remain nameless and, thus, impersonal.

Comedies are also full of cultural stereotypes. In these movies, foreigners are cast as humorous oddballs. “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” is full of Greek stereotypes – depicting its characters as loud, hairy and filled with over-the-top pride for their culture. The majority of the family’s members are named Anita, Diane and Nick, textbook Greek names. In “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” though the movie is an action film, comic relief is provided by “Short Round,” a Chinese kid Indy befriends and adopts as his sidekick. Short Round is the stereotypical Asian – he can not pronounce his R’s, he is

extremely smart, and, at one point, he drives a car poorly, playing off the notion that Asians are bad drivers.

Dramas aren't devoid of cultural stereotypes either. In the film "Blood Diamond," the entire African continent is depicted as a lawless, strife-filled land that is beyond hope. The vast majority of Africans are members of thuggish tribes that enslave their countrymen, brainwash child soldiers and partake in criminal activities. Sympathetic characters, such as a bright, English-educated schoolmaster, are either killed, shuttled to massive refugee camps, or, if they're lucky, make it out of the country. All the while, Africans in the movie justify their immoral behavior by shrugging and saying, "TIA" – This is Africa.

Even children's films resort to stereotyping foreign cultures. In multiple Disney movies, French characters such as Louis the Chef in "The Little Mermaid" and Lumiere in "Beauty and the Beast" are depicted as snobby, large nosed and food obsessed. In "The Incredibles," a French villain named Bomb Voyage is even dressed as a mime. The movie "Aladdin" bases its version of Arab culture on magical Eastern myths, filling the movie with genies, flying carpets and sorcerers. However, it also blends in another stereotype, making most of its Arab characters poor, and many scenes are full of street urchins, thugs and devious thieves.

On top of reducing foreign cultures to stereotypes, American movies simultaneously treat these cultures as inferior, either defeating the foreigners, ridiculing them or encouraging them to aspire to American life. In action movies, the American hero always ultimately defeats the foreign foe, often against all odds. In "Raiders of the Lost Ark," Indiana Jones, unarmed and usually injured, repeatedly triumphs over dozens

of large, armed Nazis and their Arab allies. Indy's American techniques are often the key to his success. In one scene, Indiana is confronted by a highly trained, sword-wielding Arab. After the Arab performs fancy tricks with his sword for a few minutes, Indy chuckles, pulls out a gun and shoots him.

Other movies laugh at the foreign cultures they depict, ridiculing them by contrasting them with "normal" American culture. In "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," Toulah, the movie's heroine, is ridiculed for her cultural differences. As a kid, her peers laugh at her for bringing Greek foods for lunch and make fun of her dad, who is constantly telling people about the importance of Greek culture. Most of the movie's comic moments come from poking fun at Greek culture and the characters' misunderstanding of American culture. Audiences are meant to laugh at the fact that Toulah's family forces her into gaudy wedding invitations decorated with Greece's flag and a reception at a place called "Aphrodite's Palace," with an optional Parthenon backdrop. When Toulah's mother receives a bundt cake from the fiancé's parents, she loudly remarks, "There's a hole in this cake!" She later puts a pot of flowers in the center, proclaiming "I fixed it!" In contrast with Ian's American parents, who are very quiet and uptight, the Greeks appear even more over the top and out of place; they are decidedly not "normal."

Despite the fact that they're often ridiculed, however, most foreigners in movies admire America. In "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," Toulah, the movie's most sympathetic character, aspires to live a "normal" life. Reflecting on her childhood, she laments, "I so badly wanted to be like the other girls, sitting together, eating their white bread

sandwiches.” Only when Toulah is able to go to college, eat white bread sandwiches with her classmates and marry an American is she truly happy.

America is often portrayed as the land of opportunity. Toulah’s parents, though fiercely proud of their Greek heritage, claim to have achieved the American Dream. Both Toulah’s mom and dad bring up the fact that they came to America with almost no money in their pockets and built a good life for their kids. “We came here for you, so that you could live,” Toulah’s mom tells her. In “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom,” Short Round wears a Yankees baseball cap, plays poker, and practically worships the very American Indiana. At one point, he promises an elephant that he will take the animal to America with him to live a good life.

Americans themselves are often portrayed as saviors. The Indian villagers that Indiana Jones rescues from an evil religious sect in “The Temple of Doom” admire Indiana right off the bat. When Indiana arrives in their village for the first time, they stroke him, feed him and are certain that he was sent by the Gods to save them. The filmmakers don’t bother explaining why the Indians can’t save themselves; it’s simply assumed that Indiana is the only one fit for the task. Similarly, in “Blood Diamond,” Maddy Bowen, an American journalist, is the one who cracks the story on blood diamonds in Africa, revealing the details about the unethical dealings to the world and alerting lawmakers to the problem.

Sometimes the endorsement of American culture is more subtle, as in most children’s movies. In “Aladdin,” though everyone in the movie is technically an Arab, only evil characters, such as Jafar, the sultan’s advisor, or the movie’s many street thugs, are overtly foreign. Sympathetic characters, such as Aladdin and Jasmine, speak with

American accents, have mostly American mannerisms and features, and dream of escaping their homeland.

These endorsements of American superiority can affect the way Americans and other cultures interact, in both the political and social arenas. According to Gamson and his colleagues, “We walk around with media generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues.” (374) Movies that constantly send messages to Americans and other cultures that Americans are the superior race can have dangerous consequences.

While violent action movies may be entertaining, they can breed what Gerbner calls “a mean world view” in both Americans and foreigners. What’s more, by reflecting and reinforcing real life events, as action movies often do, they can have a “double dose effect” on viewers, making audiences more susceptible to their messages. (Gerbner) Americans and foreigners today can watch U.S. armed forces killing terrorists in the Middle East both in the movies and on their evening news. All this violence is likely to make Americans more fearful of foreign cultures that disdain their country’s policies, while foreign cultures may be more apt to believe that America is becoming the world’s bully.

A 2006 survey for the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that, while 51 percent of Americans believed the war in Iraq had made the world a safer place, the majority in every other country surveyed felt it had made the world more dangerous. As the war entered its third year, America’s popularity in most foreign countries fell in 2006, especially in Middle Eastern nations that feel threatened by the United States’

encroachment such as Pakistan, Jordan, and Turkey, where only 12 percent of those surveyed held a favorable view of Americans.

At the same time, movies that make fun of or inflict violence on other cultures promote that behavior as natural and normal, making intolerance for other cultures acceptable for Americans and worsening America's reputation abroad. Gerbner argues that repeated viewing of violence desensitizes Americans, making violence seem like a natural solution and cloaking the after effects and consequences of such behavior. "One comes to believe that the violence [...] is normal - that everybody does it, and that it's a good way of solving problems," Gerbner argues. Viewers "lose the ability to understand the consequence of violence, to empathize, to resist, to protest." (Gerbner)

According to the FBI, of the more than 7,000 hate crimes committed in America in 2006, 13 percent were motivated by ethnicity or national origin. Additionally, when France refused to support the United States' push to go to war with Iraq in 2003, Americans felt comfortable ridiculing the French – a culture long targeted by movies - by renaming French fries "Freedom Fries." The Pew survey shows that, in 2003 and 2004, when these events occurred, favorable opinions of Americans in France dipped from more than 70 percent to just about 50 percent.

Yet, despite the negative consequences of American self promotion in movies, these types of films continue to be made. Gamson and his colleagues posit that this is because movies are made by companies that wish to maintain America's world power status, for both political and economic reasons. "The lens through which we receive [...] images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who focus it." (Gamson, 374)

U.S. economic elites want foreign cultures to believe Americans are superior because it helps the bottom line. If the American Indiana Jones is seen as a hero in China, Chinese people will probably be more likely to buy cologne endorsed by Harrison Ford. If foreigners are given the message that America is superior, they'll likely buy more American products, follow American trends, listen to American music and watch American TV, so they can be superior, too.

As media outlets continue to conglomerate, the trend just becomes more pronounced. Disney can make a movie that touts American values, styles and trends. Its various other media and merchandising arms can then sell international markets all over the world on related CDs, clothing lines, toys, books, and a myriad of other product tie-ins, without even bothering to adapt the product to appeal to diverse cultures. The net result of all of this conglomeration, Gamson says, is "a homogenization of imagery that celebrates existing power relationships and makes them seem a normal and acceptable part of the natural order." (380)

It's also in media outlets' interest to maintain the global political status quo. If American products and trends are going to be held in high regard, media outlets and businesses must make sure that foreigners see America as a superior world power. Action movies are likely most effective in this respect, casting Americans broadly as the winning "good guys" and foreigners as the losing "bad guys." The fact that villains are often from countries that are not always on friendly terms with America, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia, also helps spread the word that America will not put up with threats to its supremacy. Ridiculing different cultures sends a subtler but similar message:

Americans laugh at cultures that don't conform and realize our culture is superior to theirs.

These messages reflect and reinforce the dominant messages sent by American leadership. In 2001, President George W. Bush delivered his now famous "with us or against us" speech, telling countries they needed to contribute to America's fight against terrorism or they would not be considered a member of America's "coalition." ("With Us") The speech was essentially asking world powers to decide if they wanted to be a "good guy" or a "bad guy" in the drama playing out on the world stage.

Movies also help maintain the political status quo at home. Action movies that constantly show Americans under threat from "outsiders" help make a powerful case for homeland security initiatives. Gerbner argues that this is yet another consequence of violence in the media. In addition to desensitizing people and breeding a "mean world view," these repeated images of foreigners threatening Americans with violence create "an increased sense of vulnerability and dependence – and therefore a demand for repression from the government." (Gerbner) Support for and approval of initiatives like the Patriot Act and the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan seem to support Gerbner's point of view.

Some use of stereotypes in movies is likely inevitable. According to Silverblatt, "media communicators [...] rely on stereotypes to compensate for their limited ability to collect first-hand information." (59) Yet, repeatedly depicting entire cultures using only stereotypes can have negative effects. "The issue is not necessarily that a particular stereotype is deployed by the media, but, rather, that this stereotype is consistently the only dimension presented." (Silverblatt, 60) American films consistently portray

foreigners as subordinate, stereotypical caricatures instead of nuanced, independent human beings. The messages these films send falsely inflate American egos and breed resentment toward America in foreign countries.

Despite growing resources available to media communicators to learn about cultures in-depth, it is unlikely that more realistic portrayals will be hitting the big screen soon. As media outlets continue to conglomerate, movies that portray America as the superior culture and ridicule or harm foreigners help maintain America's political and economic dominance. If anything, media conglomeration will exacerbate the problem, as "media giants can beam the same images and ideas at a national and global audience in different forms via different media." (Gamson, 378)

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