

**Lois Brauckmuller**

**MEDC 5310: Media and Culture**

**Final Paper – America, Storyteller of the World**

**Dec. 12, 2007**

American films play in theaters the world over, bringing love stories and comedies, drama and action films to audiences with diverse cultural backgrounds. Many values may be universal, but many more may not. For better or worse, America is becoming the storyteller of the world.

Critics from the United States and abroad decry the impact of the Hollywood movie machine. “Since American popular entertainment is one of our nation’s most successful exports, it has the power to make us respected in the world. Or resented and reviled. This is awesome power,” said Jonathan Rintel, Center for Creative Voices in Media executive director (par. 17).

That power comes from a handful of media conglomerates that are scripting the stories that reflect and shape our lives. According to Stop Big Media, “the media landscape is dominated by massive corporations that, through a history of mergers and acquisitions, have concentrated too much control in too few hands” (par. 1).

Media conglomerate Viacom touts its global reach on its Web site, claiming to reach 508 million households in 161 countries and territories. “And our global presence grows every day” (Viacom). Disney’s goals in the global marketplace are multifaceted: to ensure that the “company’s brands, stories and characters are increasingly familiar in international markets; creating locally relevant product; exploiting new technologies; and leveraging economic and infrastructure growth around the world” (Walt Disney). And GE’s NBC

Universal lists as one of its key priorities: reaching growing global populations, including marketing and advertising (GE).

International audiences are familiar with American culture through the music, movies and television that we export, and these products provide a dominant image “of what America is,” according to the Pew Research Center. A study conducted by Pew in 2002 supports claims that “the invasion of American culture is often a complaint, particularly when it is seen as coming at the expense of indigenous cultures” (Kohut 66).

In general, people around the world object to the wide diffusion of American ideas and customs. Even those who are attracted to many aspects of American society, including its democratic ideas and free market traditions, object to the export of American ideas and customs (Kohut 64).

Films may tell stories of pirates, supernatural heroes and big green ogres, or they may document the life of a war hero, business leader or comedian. But they all reflect the values of media communicators who are focused on making a profit.

“Sometimes, US ideals get transmitted - such as individual rights, freedom of speech, and respect for women - and local cultures are enriched,” said Mark Rice-Oxley in the Christian Science Monitor. “At other times, materialism or worse becomes the message and local traditions get crushed” (par. 4).

Rice-Oxley is concerned about the growing commercialism that is apparent in American films. “Few countries have yet to be touched by McDonald's and Coca-Cola,” he said. “Starbucks recently opened up a new front in South America, and everyone's got a Hard Rock Café T-shirt from somewhere exotic” (par. 9).

The Terminal, released in 2004 by DreamWorks, is a prime example of a film with a materialistic ideology. Although the plot revolves around an international traveler who

becomes stranded en route to New York City, the setting is an airport terminal that has as many shopping opportunities as the average mall.

Storefronts are adorned with brand names of dozens of companies, including Borders, Starbucks, Swatch, Sbarro, Verizon, Baskin Robbins, Burger King, Paul Mitchell, and more. Royalties from product placement may have contributed a hefty amount to the production budget. In her movie review, Cynthia Fuchs of Pop Matters called it “conspicuous product placement establishing the consumer culture overload of this international neverland” (par. 5).

The three-story set was designed by Alex McDowell and “is the movie's central symbol, that all America can be found within the chain stores and fast-food restaurants of a shopping mall” (Westhoff, par. 9). The 100,000-square-foot structure took 200 employees and more than 20 weeks to build (Turan, par. 10). Members of international audiences may never set foot on American soil, but they travel here every time they view an American film. For the price of a theater ticket, they can travel around the world.

Consumer products are also written into the script and reinforce the materialistic values that provide the backdrop throughout the entire film. In one scene, our international traveler has resorted to eating sandwiches of free saltine crackers and condiments, while his nemesis plays with the drinking straw in a specialty Starbucks drink. In another scene, the traveler purchases a Boss suit and refers to its name and price when he receives a compliment. And, more than once, he refers to Payless Shoes, “with sensible heels.”

The keen traveler observes that he can earn a quarter each time that he returns a wayward baggage cart to its station and soon becomes an entrepreneur. With his first 50 cents, he purchases a hamburger at Burger King and devours it with such passion that a vegetarian might want a burger. After a whirlwind collection of carts, he returns to Burger

King where a smiling food server fills his tray with BK wrappers of juicy food. No narrator is necessary to sell this product.

But materialism is not the only value that is revealed. Traveler Viktor Navorski, played by Tom Hanks, is treated with little respect when his flight arrives at JFK. During his flight, Viktor's native country experiences a coup and he is left in bureaucratic limbo since he is a man without a country.

He is confronted with matter-of-fact airport workers who have no sympathy for his plight. He is just another foreigner traveling through their jurisdiction, and their priority is to pass him on to another agency

The Americans speak quickly, without making eye contact, and openly express frustration at Viktor's challenges with the English language. They talk "at" him, rather than "to" him. Jokes are made about his confusion of similar words: a man of "misery" rather than "mystery," and "shares panties" rather than "Cher's panties." They make no effort to clear up the confusion.

Many of the characters that play supporting roles as service workers in the film are from other countries. Janitors, food workers, and airline personnel are stereotyped with thick accents and ethnic characterizations. An Indian janitor spins plates and a Hispanic food worker is a Romeo.

References to ethnic groups are also stereotypical. A group is targeted for inspection because they are Chinese travelers wearing Walt Disney shirts and not a single one is carrying a camera. In another scene, the lead administrator refers to "Columbians, Chinese and kids from Long Island." The foreigners are identified by country, while the Americans are identified by age group and country. The tone of his voice changes as he refers to the American youths.

The film focuses on Viktor's delayed status and we do not learn the reason for his visit until the end of the film. His father had been a big fan of American Jazz and in 1958 saw a photograph in a Hungarian newspaper of 57 Jazz greats. He made it his life's mission to get autographs from each of the musicians in the photo, named "A Great Day in Harlem."

Viktor had traveled to New York for the final autograph that his father had not been able to acquire in his lifetime. "Viktor represents a passion for art that transcends nation, identity, and time," said Pop Matters reviewer Fuchs (par. 14). It is a sad that his simple desire to satisfy the final wish of his father becomes a bureaucratic nightmare.

Despite its emphasis on American consumerism and its poor example of how foreigners are treated while in American, several factors provide the film with credibility. The Terminal was based loosely on the true story of Iranian-born Merhan Karimi Nasseri, who has lived at Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris since losing his documentation in 1988 (Fuchs, par. 14).

Secondly, the film was directed by Steven Spielberg, who has been called "our film culture's Norman Rockwell" (Thomson, par. 2). This middle-age white man from the heartland of America is recognized the world over for his contributions to the film industry. He is a voice of mainstream American filmmakers.

In addition, the leading character is Tom Hanks, who is also recognized for the dozens of films he has to his credit. While worldwide audiences recognize that the function of this film is entertainment, they may not understand that the values highlighted in the film may not be a true picture of American ideology.

Another Tom Hanks film with an international flavor is My Big Fat Greek Wedding, released in 2002 by independent film company Big Wedding. Hanks produced the film with

his wife, Rita Wilson, after she saw a one-woman show about the life of Nia Vardalos, who married a non-Greek (Minow, par. 1). Vardalos wrote the screenplay and played the leading role of Fatoula Portokalos, who appeared destined to work forever in a family restaurant while her father tried to marry her off. The excitement begins when Toula falls in love and decides to marry a non-Greek.

The dominant culture in the film is that of the Greek family that bursts into each scene. American culture plays only a minor role as Toula's love interest quickly assimilates into the Greek way of life. A few scenes with her future in-laws portray Americans as uptight and standoffish. UK critic Ian Waldron-Mantgani described them "as sour embodiments of middle-class manners, who talk real low and seem to be made uncomfortable by any little touches of liveliness" (par. 6). Toula's family, in contrast, is loud, boisterous, nosy and full of love.

When the film opens, Toula is reminiscing about her childhood and her wishes to be like all the other little girls, who happened to be "blond and delicate." She ate mousaka while they ate Wonder Bread. And she dreamed of attending Brownies rather than Greek school, where she learned the language so she could communicate with a future mother-in-law. After all, "Greek girls are expected to marry Greek boys, have Greek babies, and feed everyone until the day we die."

Toula's home is modeled after the Parthenon and a Greek flag is painted on the garage door. Her father says there are two kinds of people in the world, Greeks and people that wish they were Greeks. And he can find a Greek meaning at the root of any word. It is an understatement to say that he is proud of his heritage.

Characters represent many stereotypes of Greek culture, but audience members laugh with them, not at them, since most families have a character or two like these. Toula just happens to come from a large Greek family.

Their faults are accepted and their errors are forgiven. The engaged couple takes it in stride when wedding plans are made without their consideration. Even the in-laws make a joke when the wedding invitation lists the groom's mother as Harry, rather than Harriet.

Writer and actor Vardalos said that the film is bigger than any one family or culture. "I thought I had written a Greek story and then a woman came up to me two weeks after we'd opened in the US and she said, 'I'm Chinese and you're talking about MY family.' And that's when I realised that 'Greek Wedding' has crossover appeal" (Failla, par. 14).

The worldwide distribution of American films is not always based on crossover appeal, however. Many have universal story lines that transcend cultural boundaries. A simple love story might be successful even without dialogue. But, what if that love story is about a couple with different religious backgrounds. Or of the same sex. Not every country is ready – and they may choose never to be – for America's storytellers.

The driving force of the American film industry is profit. My Big Fat Greek Wedding was one of the top grossing films in 2002, ranking at 9 with a gross of \$368.7 million. The international market was 34.5 percent of that. The Terminal ranked 19 in world distribution in 2004 with 64.5 percent of its \$219.4 million gross from international ticket sales. As this year's top film, Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End, approaches the billion dollar mark, it is clear that the American film industry is thriving (Box Office Mojo).

Four Italian management consultants believe that films have more than entertainment value and have written a book on how "to get ahead in business – read fewer textbooks and watch more films" (BBC, par. 1). Cinema for Managers recommends 50 films

that the consultants say showcase good business practices and teach lessons about behavior. The Terminal is one of their selections, and is a typical example of turning "diversity" into an advantage and an innovative strategy for succeeding in business, they said (par. 10).

“High-quality films ... can offer lessons about problem-solving and teamwork as well as focusing on issues such as globalization and diversity,” said Francesco Bogliari, one of the consultants (BBC, par. 6). Even John Wayne can teach a lesson or two about leadership and mission.

Not everyone embraces American theater as a world classroom, however. French writer and philosopher Regis Debray has said:

What's good for Columbia and Warner Brothers is good for America, O.K.; the question now is whether it's good for the rest of the world. The American empire will pass, like the others. Let's at least make sure it does not leave irreparable damage to our creative abilities behind it (Cohen, par. 8).

In 2005, 148 countries of the United Nations cultural body adopted an international treaty to protect cultural diversity. The convention guarantees that all measures aimed at protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions shall not hinder respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, "such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose (them)..." (Godoy, par. 17). The United States was one of two countries that voted against ratification. Four countries abstained.

U.S. representatives claimed that the United Nations agency does not have authority to establish binding rules on the matter since cultural goods are also objects of international trade. Richard Martin, co-head of the U.S. delegation, called the text "deeply flawed and

fundamentally incompatible with (the agency's) obligation to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image" (Godoy, par. 9).

Critics say that the United States classifies cultural products as merchandise, where most countries view it as expression of cultural identity.

Many international consumers of America's stories are unaware of the political drama behind the scenes. They watch action films that translate easily to a multitude of languages. They see Nike sneakers and Boss business suits, Starbucks drinks in grande plastic cups, bare midriffs and tattoos. They may not want it all, but repeat exposure makes these choices more acceptable, even though they may not reflect the ideology of their own country.

French writer Debray said, "an American monoculture would inflict a sad future on the world, one in which the planet is converted to a global supermarket where people have to choose between the local ayatollah and Coca-Cola" (Cohen, par. 35).

Each American film that rolls in an African theater leaves one less screen for productions created by local artists. One less story about a historic legend or a lost craft may never be told. Instead, children learn about pirates and green ogres and they are mesmerized by the tales we have to tell.

Fortunately, international producers of cultural content see the threat to their own industry and have voiced their concerns to bodies like the United Nations cultural council. Many international consumers recognize the threat to their own stories and protest the American intrusion into their theaters and homes. And many Americans resent that their stories are being told by a few large companies with similar ideologies.

“As critical consumers, those of us who enjoy movies and recognize their cultural significance must raise these broader issues in public forums as well as in our personal conversations,” said media & culture author Richard Campbell (265).

The need for media literacy at home and abroad increases with each theater release, whether it is a blockbuster hit or an independent production. The ideologies are typically the same. Americans must take responsibility for the stories that it shares with worldwide audiences.

#### Works Cited

BBC online. “Bosses Urged to Watch More Movies.” 2 July 2007. 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6260548.stm>>

Box Office Mojo. “2002 Worldwide Grosses.” 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=2002&p=.htm>>

“2004 Worldwide Grosses.” 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=2004&p=.htm>>

“2007 Worldwide Grosses.” 12 Dec. 2007

<<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/?view2=worldwide&view=releasedate&p=.htm>>

Campbell, Richard, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos. media & culture 5: an introduction to mass communication. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.

Cohen, Roger. “FILM; Aux Armes! France Rallies To Battle Sly and T. Rex.” The New York Times online. 2 Jan. 1994. 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9801E2DD163EF931A35752C0A962958260>>

Failla, Annemarie. "Nia Vardalos My Big Fat Greek Wedding" femail.com.au. 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.femail.com.au/niavardalos.htm>>

Fuchs, Cynthia. "The Terminal." Pop Matters online. 17 June 2004

<<http://www.popmatters.com/film/reviews/t/terminal-2004.shtml>>

GE Fact Sheet: NBC Universal. 2007. 10 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.ge.com/company/businesses/factsheets/nbcu.html>>

Godoy, Julio. "CULTURE: UNESCO Adopts Convention to Protect Diversity." Inter Press Service online. 20 Oct. 2005. 12 Dec. 2007.

<<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=30714>>

Kohut, Andre. Dir. "What the World Thinks in 2002" How Global Publics View: Their Lives, Their Countries, The World, America. Pew Research Center. 4 Dec. 2002. 11

Dec. 2007 <<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/165.pdf>>

Minow, Nell. "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" Common Sense Review. Common Sense Media online. 10 Dec. 2007. <[http://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/My-](http://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/My-Big-Fat-Greek.html)

[Big-Fat-Greek.html](http://www.common sense media.org/movie-reviews/My-Big-Fat-Greek.html)>

My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Dir. Joel Zwick. Big Wedding, 2002.

Rice-Oxley, Mark. "In 2,000 Years, Will the World Remember Disney or Plato?" Christian Science Monitor online. 15 Jan. 2004. 11 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0115/p16s02-usfp.html>>

Rintels, Jonathan. Public Interest and Creative Communities Discuss "Can Media Artists Survive Media Concentration?" Center for Creative Voices in Media online.

1 April 2004. 10 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.creativevoices.us/php-bin/news/showArticle.php?id=77>>

Stopbigmedia.com. 12 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.stopbigmedia.com/chart.php>>

The Terminal. Dir. Steven Spielberg. DreamWorks, 2005.

Thomson, Desson. "Terminal: Cleared for Takeoff." WashingtonPost.com. 18 June 2004.

10 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A49173-2004Jun17.html>>

Turan, Kenneth. "Movie Review: The Terminal." Los Angeles Times calendarlivecom.

online. 18 June 2004. 10 Dec. 2007

<http://www.calendarlive.com/movies/reviews/cl-et-turan18jun18,2,4460047.story?coll=cl-mreview>

Viacom. "REACHING OUR GLOBAL AUDIENCE"

<<http://www.viacom.com/OUR%20BRANDS/GLOBAL%20REACH/default.aspx>>

Waldron-Mantgani, Ian. "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." The UK Critic online. 20 Sept. 2002.

11 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.ukcritic.com/mybigfatgreek1.html>>

"Walt Disney International." The Walt Disney Company 2006 Annual Report 10 Dec. 2007

<[http://corporate.disney.go.com/investors/annual\\_reports/2006/kb/wdi.html](http://corporate.disney.go.com/investors/annual_reports/2006/kb/wdi.html)>

Westhoff, Jeffrey. "The Terminal (2004) Movie Review: Spielberg's most optimistic film

since 1989." Rotten Tomatoes online. 18 June 2004. 10 Dec. 2007.

<<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/click/movie-1133499/reviews.php?critic=columns&sortby=default&page=1&rid=1290500>>