

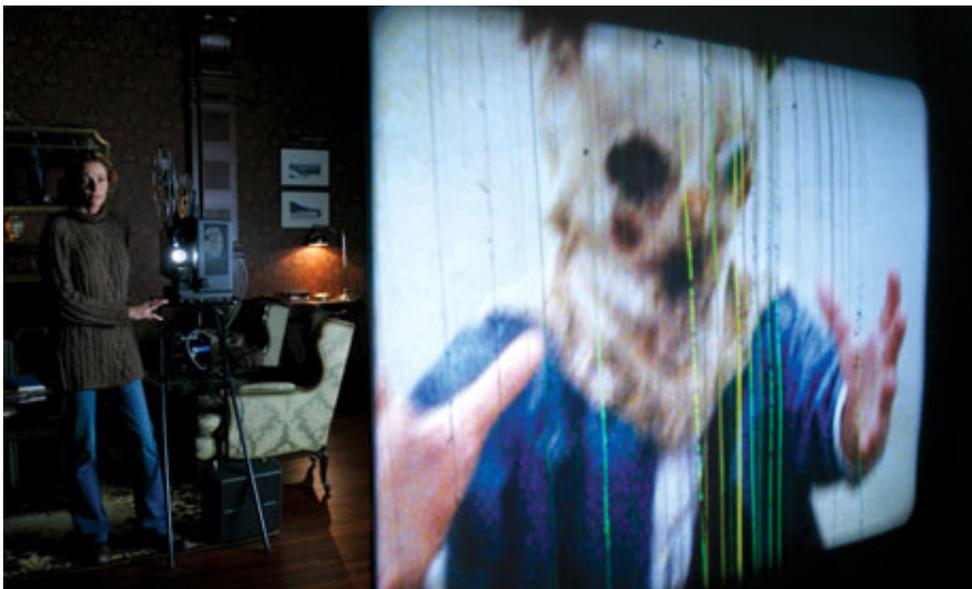
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**FILM
BLOG**



Is Hollywood backing a blessing for local-language films – or a curse?

Big studios have poured money into foreign-language films – but is this just a backdoor way to dominate overseas markets?



Spanish director JA Bayona's *The Orphanage* (2007) was one of the largest non-English-language crossovers of the decade. Photograph: c.PicHouse/Everett / Rex Feature

When the horror film *The Orphanage* opened big in its home country of Spain in October 2007, distributor Warner Brothers wanted director JA Bayona to know he was loved. "We call him Jota," says Richard Fox, executive VP of international at Warner. "He's an amazing Superman fan, and I had a piece of kryptonite from the Bryan Singer version sent to my hotel in Barcelona. After this huge opening weekend, we went to a fish restaurant on Monday night to celebrate. I got there early, so I was sat there with my box of kryptonite, looking at the portraits on the wall: Bill Clinton, Tom Cruise, Zinedine Zidane. When Jota arrived, I gave him the

kryptonite, and a guy took a photo. We sat and had a three-hour dinner. When we left, whose photo was now above Clinton's, but Jota's?"

Bayona – the Catalan fanboy making it global – had found himself a prime spot in one of cinema's newest growth areas. The Orphanage went on to take \$78m worldwide, one of the largest non-English-language crossovers of the decade. Part-produced by Warner, it was a trophy example of Hollywood's entry in the noughties into what, in studio parlance, was called "local-language production": developing, or picking up for distribution, foreign-language films in their native countries. Since Warner, Sony and Disney first set up such operations in the late 90s, there have been dozens of these works: A Very Long Engagement (Warner, 2004), Night Watch (Fox, 2004), My Name Is Khan (Fox, 2010), Heartbreaker (Universal, 2010), to name a few your DVD player may have gobbled. Last year, there were apparently as many as 100 associated with the major studios.

"It's old-fashioned just to be making English-language movies," says Sanford Panitch, president of Fox International Productions (FIP).

"You look at it, and think: 'How could this not have happened from the beginning?'" It certainly feels in step with the age of globalisation, which gave birth to the one-size-(XXXL)-fits-all blockbuster strategy, but also calls for more sensitive approaches. "Blockbusters are made

for the whole world," continues Panitch, "but audiences are made up of different quadrants. Not everybody eats the same food. It doesn't work like that in the world."

But, to go back to Bayona and the fish restaurant, perhaps film-makers around the world should beware of Americans bearing gifts (especially kryptonite). Could local-language film be simply a Trojan horse – a backdoor method of gaining a greater share of overseas box office? This, with the US cinema market stagnant and the emerging economies still producing double-digit growth, is the all-important prize these days. David Kosse, president of international at Universal Pictures, is quick to dispel any suggestion that Hollywood incursions weaken foreign industries: "You could categorise it as more competition, or you could categorise it as more support. I tend to view it as more support, and I think most people do. If you're a producer, you have more people to sell your film to, and more people to allow you to realise your vision."

Richard Fox and Sanford Panitch say similar things. JA Bayona, who went on to make the \$28m The Impossible (again partly under Warner stewardship), would presumably agree. He is one example of a local film-maker who has benefited, but not everyone is convinced Hollywood's attitude to local-language production is fundamentally nurturing. "Realistically, what they're looking for is free money [such

as foreign companies willing to fund development, and/or government subsidies]," says Toby Miller, media academic and co-author of Global Hollywood 2. "Free money to which they can attach their name, and the production risk is away from them. It doesn't mean all individuals associated with the studios are like that. It doesn't mean everyone associated with the films is. But that's the logic of the studios, and how they operate."

Miller believes the strength of the studios' commitment to overseas cinema should be judged by the level of their own cash invested; but it's impossible to pin down the broad picture amid the tangle of co-productions, distribution acquisitions, part-financing, and fully chaperoned projects that make up the local-language coalface. Universal seem to have the most hands-off stance. Kosse says they rarely develop from scratch, preferring a more "opportunistic" approach to pick up films to complement what's happening in individual countries. "It depends on the kind of movies that are coming out from the main slate from the studio in America: how many of those there are, and what types of movies we end up making that year." That's in contrast to Fox, who develop fully in close to half of their 28 worldwide offices, and Warner, who also favour a more long-term approach.

Richard Fox refers to a five-year plan that Warner put in place after

their early disjointed attempts at local-language films, promising 20 films across their various territories. "You can't just go, 'I'm going to do one film,'" he says. "I see some other players, they may come in, do one or two films, and get crushed on them. That happens to all the studios. You have four or five that bat during a season – maybe you get a home run, maybe three strike-outs. But you've really got to play for the portfolio, play for the long-term." Warner have now made 420 across all countries. That diligence has resulted in several high-profile partnerships, including with superstar-writer-director Til Schweiger in Germany, whose Kokowääh and Rabbit Without Ears franchises are some of the most lucrative ever in that country; Pedro Almodóvar, whose last three films were handled by Warner in Spain; and with Guillermo del Toro for his Spanish-language work (the director also introduced Bayona to the studio).

Are these films still German, or Spanish, or whatever – or are they, hopped up on American cash and conglomerate marketing, a sort of mestizo-Hollywood? As with most questions of authenticity, it's probably too late for a meaningful answer. But the sustained involvement of the studios begs sharper questions about the effects of that influence.

Undoubtedly, Hollywood often brings in a focused professionalism and unmatched technical expertise that can raise the bar in overseas

industries. Panitch points to the Avatar 3D technicians who worked on Fox Star's Bollywood horror, Raaz 3. Another Fox local-language exec working in Russia refers to the tougher standards of script development put in place there. Panitch views these sorts of arrangements as a new era of collaboration: "It couldn't really have happened in the Hollywood of the 50s and 60s. Bertolucci would be working with an Italian producer, be discovered, come to Los Angeles, and someone would take a shot on him. But the Hollywood studios weren't involved in making the original Bertolucci film." It's equally possible, however, that American involvement at this earlier stage heightens the chances of talent moving on too quickly instead of tilling their home turf. That looked strongly the case with Kazakh director Timur Bekmambetov, who abandoned the projected Watch fantasy trilogy he was making with Fox in the mid-noughties, in favour of Angelina Jolie's *Wanted*.

Like Bayona, Del Toro, Park Chan-wook, Neill Blomkamp and other film-makers who split their time between home and Hollywood, it seems undeniable Bekmambetov's American links also bring side benefits to Russia. His production company, Bazelevs, has supplied a stream of Hollywoodised commercial hits in recent years – some, like the Universal-produced Black Lightning, part of the local-language train.



Russia goes to

Hollywood ... Black Lightning

But again, it's open to debate whether an elevated Hollywood presence in a country works to increase the overall market share for local films. Lots of variables can affect that figure. It's striking, though, that the studio's local-language activity often thrives most in countries with markedly lower shares for local films, such as Spain, Russia, Mexico and Germany; perhaps where tastes have been more deeply sculpted by mainstream US fare that dominates the market. So the studios are most likely to have solid infrastructure there, with receptive audiences for the kind of local-inflected commercial genre films that constitute the meat and drink of local-language output – as in Germany (which, since Jack Warner tried to persuade the US government to suppress the native industry after the second world

war, has been a compliant market for Hollywood).

Panitch and Richard Fox both argue that the studios are just serving mainstream popular tastes that would exist anyway, regardless of their presence – and promoting foreign film-makers in the process. "Hollywood doesn't just mean English language – what it means is high-quality cinema, in any language," says Panitch. "We're basically trying to get the most successful films," says Fox, "we're not out to make art movies in any country. So, almost by definition, we're not the only one going for that movie; other local players are, too."

The Warner chief does concede that the studios can sometimes be too rigidly commercial, and overlook more intrepid routes. All the executives I spoke to say they no longer look to create breakout hits that will travel outside of their country of origin; local-language content has to be profitable at home first, and anything else is an added bonus. I wonder if the film-makers feel the same. Hollywood can wait for its flagship blockbusters to trawl for global audiences, but any ambitious director would want the same opportunity for his movie. Warner initially pushed for Bayona to film *The Impossible* in Spanish, before other partners insisted that he should maximise his audience by making the characters British. And maybe that switch wasn't even necessary. The noughties showed, from *City of God* to *Slumdog Millionaire* or *Let the Right One in*, that non-English

language work was capable of grabbing mass audiences – if US studios, or ambitious overseas ones, had the courage to go the extra mile.



Na Hong-Jin's

The Yellow Sea (2010) was a shrewd investment on the part of FIP.

Photograph: Cho Wonjin

Clearly, we're living in a different world when American studios demand that local film-makers keep it real. If local-language production is a Trojan horse gambit, then the hardest fighting is still ahead for Hollywood. The countries offering the most cultural resistance and local pride – France, South Korea, Turkey, India, China – are firmly in its sights, but it's far from certain that it will enjoy the same levels of domination there. But maybe it's progress that the struggle for the mainstream now needs subtitles.

Five films where Hollywood got its phrasebook out

The Road Home (1999)

Everyone's talking Chinese box office now, but Sony was the first Hollywood outfit to really recognise its importance. Subsidiary Columbia Pictures Asia started its local-language dabblings there in the late 90s, including this Zhang Yimou drama, which introduced us to Zhang Ziyi, a year before she broke out in another Columbia film: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Roadside Romeo (2008)

Part of Disney mid-noughties push into Bollywood, this \$1.8m animation spin on *The Lady and the Tramp* posted disappointing results – like a lot of US sallies into India (until very recently). Disney – perhaps clearing their decks for the portfolio of mega-franchises with which they're spearheading their global strategy now – ultimately decided local-language was not for them, and closed their specialist unit in 2011.

How to Lose Friends and Alienate People (2008)

The snark in Film Four's adaptation of Toby Young's memoir was in

unapologetic British, which counts as a foreign language to the American studios. A distribution pickup for Paramount's Worldwide Acquisitions Group, its disappointing box office was part of a so-so slate of results for the studio's international arm. The unit closed in 2011 – with Paramount preferring off-the-peg tailorings for the juiciest territories, such as filming sections of Transformers 4 in Beijing.

The Yellow Sea (2010)

Na Hong-Jin's followup to his much-praised *The Chaser* looked like a chip off the old Korean block: gritty, dynamic and hurtling towards a Senecan bloodbath. Actually, it was a shrewd investment on the part of FIP, their first in Korea; a bet on one of the country's most exciting up-and-coming directors that seriously paid off.

The Artist (2011)

The best picture Oscar-winner was billed as a beautiful irony: the outsiders' homage to old-time Hollywood, from *la belle* France. Actually it was from *la belle* Burbank, partially funded and co-produced by Warner France – though the creative team, led by director Michel Hazanavicius, was certifiably Gallic. Warner got cold feet on handling it worldwide – put off by black-and-white visuals and lack of dialogue – and let the Weinsteins take the strain.

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