

It is Only a Matter of Style: Hollywood and the Myth of American Cultural Influence in Poland

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In the year 2000 I was standing on a street in Racibórz with a Polish acquaintance named Marcin. A young man in a beat-up Fiat Maluch raced by at breakneck speed, barely negotiating the turn he was making without rolling his car. Marcin turned to me and said, in all seriousness, "They drive like that because they see it in American films". In the following years I would hear many other behaviors and phenomena blamed on American popular culture, from unruliness in the school classroom to, oddly enough, the abundance of Christmas lights during the winter holidays. This belief in America's influence had received legitimate sanction. According to Professor Włodzimierz Zawadzki in an interview for the *Journal of International Institute of the University of Michigan*: "American mass culture is attacking us on all fronts. Blue jeans, baseball hats, fast food, pop music, American movies and sitcoms are everywhere... for good or bad we are joining the global culture. And that means more Americanization" (Zawadzki, as quoted in Kolbrak and Gianoplus 1995: 3). The question of how a culture an ocean away from Poland could have such a truly profound and far-reaching influence so as to "Americanize" it is quite debatable. However, this sense that America overwhelms other countries with its shallow and vulgar cultural products is one that is of great concern today everywhere, and has led to a debate over whether the concept of national identity itself is under threat in this era of globalization. More specifically, as Dr Ewa Gębicka of Śląski University in Katowice puts it, "The point of the matter is that American cinema does not only sell movies, it sells the lifestyle, fashions, and

trends. What is exported together with the movies are American products and ways of consumption, American landscapes, ways of thinking, language, and customs... All this can be treated as a signal of media imperialism and be considered a material threat to the cultural identity of Europe" (Gębicka 2002: 382, author's translation). The basic idea circulating, therefore, is that America generally defined as Hollywood is exporting not only films, but the "American way of life". This paper will explore the question of whether this promotion of American mass culture through Hollywood films is tantamount to a promotion of America as a nation and culture, and whether it truly constitutes a threat to Polish culture and traditions, particularly among young people. It will also be argued that the trends in the globalization of American culture products is more a negative for the U.S. than other countries.

One can easily understand Polish, and indeed the world's, frustration. Any trip to one's local multiplex cinema reveals the extent of Hollywood's dominance, as most of what is playing is overwhelmingly American in origin. Turn on the television and the story is the same. Worldwide it is no different. Although more films are actually made in Bollywood, it is only Hollywood that manages to distribute its products in over 150 countries, thereby taking in revenue averaging 30 billion a year. These foreign markets account for half of Hollywood's profits, and have made the movie industry the second largest American exporter after Aerospace. To put this in greater perspective, in Europe alone American films make up 85% of box office returns. A considerable portion of this 85% comes from films designed to be "blockbusters", meant to appeal to a worldwide audience rather than the critics or intelligentsia, or the people of any one particular country. *Titanic* is one such example. It has probably been seen by more people on Earth than any other film, grossing 1.8 billion worldwide. Leonardo Di Caprio, one of its likeable stars, once even said in an interview that deep in the Amazon jungle he came across tribal villages that had all seen this movie on their communal TV. Satellites distribute such blockbusters along with cheap syndicated U.S. television globally, ensuring that frivolous shows like *Baywatch* are broadcast in 140 countries with a weekly audience 1 billion. American game shows have also made their presence felt, *Wheel of Fortune*, for instance, is *Kolo Fortuny* in Poland (Quarles 2006: 6). These stark facts do indicate the almost awesome power of Hollywood and the American entertainment industry, and are indeed striking examples of their global reach. But looking beneath the surface of this international trend begs a question that must be taken into account: Is America, broadly defined, exporting itself through Hollywood, or is an entirely different phenomenon occurring?

It is worth noting that behind this apparent international promotion of America is not America as a unified nation or culture, but rather a multinational corporate effort to gain profit. Many Hollywood studios left American hands long ago. Two of the most successful, Columbia Tristar and Fox, are owned by the foreign media conglomerates Sony and Australia's News Corporation, respectively. Yet curiously, nobody accuses the Japanese or the Australians of trying to culturally colonize the world. In 1992, in response to these new patterns in media ownership, American author and culture critic Herbert Schiller wrote: "American cultural imperialism is not dead, but it no longer adequately describes the global cultural condition. Today it is more useful to view transnational corporate culture as the central force, with a continuing heavy flavor of U.S. media know-how, derived from long experience with marketing and entertainment skills and practices" (Schiller, quoted in Quarles 2006: 1). These massive international media corporations are not nationalistic or patriotic, and although some may be based in America this is of diminishing significance. They do what makes money, in whatever country they are based out of, pandering to all who will buy. America becomes an easy target to blame for their dominance given its high geo-political profile, despite the fact that worldwide popular taste now determines much of what is made in Hollywood. While the implications of this are unfortunately negative for the rest of the world, they are more so for America, as will be discussed momentarily. What this also means is that Hollywood now more than ever should not be considered remotely representative of the country it is situated in.

Considering the fact that Hollywood is now a transnational endeavor, it is worth looking back to the past to determine the degree of international influence that has been present in American filmmaking since its beginnings. What is revealed is that Hollywood has always been less than "100% American", to use a propaganda slogan from the First World War. Take any decade of the twentieth century and one finds a wealth of international talent in "the dream factory". Almost everybody with hopes of making it in the movie industry goes there if they want an international career, thus many of "America's" most successful and beloved film stars and directors are often from other countries. The list is never-ending: Charlie Chaplin, a Brit who found fame in the U.S.A., another Brit, Alfred Hitchcock, was America's "master of suspense." Erich Von Stroheim, the German master of silent cinema, also worked in the U.S... In the 1920s America's great lover was Valentino, an Italian who was Hollywood's first romantic leading man. The Pole, Pola Negri, also found great success during this era. Hollywood's leading ladies have often hailed from abroad, for example the Swede Greta Garbo or the German Marlene Dietrich.

Ironically enough, the Englishman Cary Grant, who had a working class background, came to epitomize not only Hollywood glamour but America's representative upper crust gentleman in the 40s, 50s, and 60s. Things are very similar today. Hollywood's A-list includes: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Penelope Cruz, Salma Hayek, Jude Law, Hugh Grant, Orlando Bloom, Clive Owen, Russell Crow, Nicole Kidman, and Liam Neeson, recently chosen to play the American sex researcher, Alfred Kinsey.

Americans do not even think twice about this foreign presence, though it could be argued that it is corrupting and diminishing the purity of American cinema. The recent epic *Cold Mountain* (2003) serves as a particularly silly example. This otherwise typically American Civil War story boasts a Brit, Jude Law, and an Australian, Nicole Kidman in the leading roles, both speaking with absurdly, painfully bad faux-southern accents. Going back sixty-seven years one finds the same forces at work, again during the Civil War. There is no more emblematic American moving picture than *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Yet here we find dapper Englishman Leslie Howard as the archetypical southern male, speaking with flawless RP. Luckily enough the archetypical southern woman, Scarlett O'Hara, the Brit Vivian Leigh, is linguistically skilled enough to disguise her roots. The odd thing is that Americans would never think of complaining about such things, they are open to them most likely because America is used to such harmless foreign influence. Other than manufactured goods from China or Japan, Americans are relatively indifferent to such intrusions in the national cinematic realm, as well as elsewhere. Few, if any, other countries would tolerate this. Can one imagine a German playing Napoleon in a French-made epic, or Pan Tadeusz being portrayed by a Romanian in a Polish production? No, but nonetheless no danger is posed to national identity by such details.

The danger that does exist due to such internationalization, however, has implications not for national identity, but rather the artistic integrity and cultural specificity of American cinema. Being that Hollywood is now obsessed with the global market for the obvious economic reasons detailed above, the more this becomes prevalent, the more it produces generic blockbusters such as *Titanic*, and a host of action films laden with special effects, violence, simpleminded plots, and sex. Such films can be appreciated, if that is the right word, by the whole world, while complexity, subtlety, intricate dialogue, and any thing that resonates only with Americans falls by the wayside. Any detailed American cultural observation is traded for subjects anyone can identify with, meaning ultimately that the globalization of U.S.-made movies does not threaten to undermine the world's various cul-

tures, but instead threatens the longevity and very existence of authentic American cinema. Polish movies will always be made for Poles, and therefore will be Polish. Can one imagine Kotorski's *Dzień Świra* adapted for the international market? This should put America's tragedy into perspective. But the U.S.A., to its own great misfortune, is now making movies for the world, therefore diluting its own cultural uniqueness. This is bound to happen because what is really American, films by Woody Allen or the young Martin Scorsese set in New York City such as *Anne Hall*, and *Manhattan*, or *Taxi Driver*, and *Meanstreets*, is not rabidly popular globally. Certainly, Allen has a European audience and Scorsese has won international critical acclaim, but a hit on the scale of *Titanic* is thankfully not in the future for either of them. Their films are complex in theme and dialogue, and deal with specific American settings and obsessions, relatively few people in other countries can identify with them just as few average Americans would readily identify with a film about the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Not surprisingly, the great American filmmakers mentioned above are Hollywood outsiders, which further demonstrates that the equation of Hollywood with American culture is not particularly sound.

The interesting fact is that out of every country in the global community, it is likely that America itself has been and remains the most hostile and suspicious toward Hollywood. This has been the case from its inception. As early as the 1930s, strict regulation was adopted by Hollywood studios in the form of the Production Code Administration, or Hays Office, whose function was to ensure that growing pressure from politicians, the , and a public that perceived Hollywood as "Sin City" would not result in any deeply intrusive government censorship. This code covered all possibly offensive artistic infractions, from sex and language to the depiction of race relations (Doherty 1999: 1-2). American suspicion and persecution of Hollywood later peaked in the late 1940s and early 50s, when the United States Government held the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, designed among other things to purge California's studios of any subversive leftist, meaning communist, influence. Writers, actors, and studio heads were called to Washington to testify before the Senate and declare their opposition to the "Red Menace". Those who did not cooperate and even some who did were blacklisted, while the studio heads also responded with a rush of anti-communist propaganda films in an effort to placate the government (Mills 1998: 1-4).

Today, of course, such overt government meddling is a thing of the past, yet deep wariness and often contempt is still prevalent towards Hollywood from American religious groups and politicians alike. In the U.S., Hollywood is constantly criticized by these powerful voices for its emphasis on sex, materialism, fast living, and

violence. Conservative populations in the South and Midwest believe it corrupts the nation's children, and see the California-based entertainment industry as an organ that promotes liberal ideology, feminism, and homosexuality. In the book *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War Against Traditional Values* by film critic Michael Medved, such beliefs are expounded. Medved asserts that "the dream factory has become the poison factory," and in such descriptively titled chapters as "The Attack on Religion", "The Addiction to Violence", "Promoting Promiscuity", and "The Infatuation with Foul Language," he accuses Hollywood of assaulting America with a liberal ideological agenda that threatens the nation's families (Medved 1993: 1). Senator Bob Dole when running for President made the movie industry a primary target, declaring that Americans "must hold Hollywood and the entire entertainment industry accountable for putting profit ahead of common decency" (Figueirido 1996: 1). Films like *Brokeback Mountain*, the gay western, naturally do little to endear Hollywood to America's millions strong Religious Right. Hatred and fear of Hollywood's influence and its perceived morally deleterious effects, therefore, is not confined to countries outside the U.S.A., but is rather an American specialty.

Before finally putting to rest the notion that internationally distributed Hollywood films promote American culture, it is useful to define the word, itself. *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines *culture* as "the ideas, beliefs, and customs that are shared and accepted by people in a society" (334). It is safe to say that Hollywood's capitalists are not interested in promoting this complex American picture to the world. What Hollywood does promote, however, is American *style*, which is a culture substitute designed to encourage materialism and consumption. Here is where American products blatantly advertised in movies and the new fads they create are mistaken for culture. These styles are easily changeable, meaning the popularity of hip hop clothing in Poland among some young men, for example, is momentary. Like most fashions, it will eventually pass into oblivion, harming no one. Some Polish teenagers and young adults today may look Americanized, but this is deceptive in the extreme. After six years in Poland spent teaching eighteen to twenty-four year olds I can say definitively that there is nothing "American" about them, and no true American cultural influence is observable except stylistically. What is discernable rests only the surface, for example in Nike shoes. What is underneath has not changed. On a more general level, it would be essentially impossible to say any facet of Polish culture, defined above, is "American" at all. Poles may shop in American style malls and consume some American products, but aside from this no real cultural affinity is detectable. Polish and American cul-

ture are so totally different as to constitute polar opposites in some areas, and it should not be surprising that considering the radically different histories of each, Poles and Americans have fundamentally different outlooks on life. Poles are deeply suspicious of their government, Americans are generally naïve when it comes to theirs. Polish manners have a great deal of formality to them, in America almost everyone is on a first name basis. Poles are reserved about their private lives, Americans are disturbingly open about every kernel of their inner workings and personal relationships. In a Polish classroom the students work together for the good of the group, in America it is every student for himself. Poles reject gun ownership, many Americans see it as their God-given right. Turn over a Polish rock and you will find a brooding pessimist, throw an American rock and you will hit and quixotic optimist. In Poland you wear your mood on your sleeve, while America is the land of eternal smiles. One could continue at length.

In all honestly, it is strange to think why anyone in a nation whose language and culture survived over a century of partition by foreign empires, two world wars, and communism would feel threatened by a can of Coca-Cola. After all, an inane movie like *Pretty Woman* or a Big Mac is no match the religious and cultural traditions that, by all appearances, still remain incredibly strong in everyday Polish life. American life and culture, on the other hand, is not much like the world portrayed in the Hollywood movies that have descended on Polish cinemas. Hollywood is truly a dream factory. It is the land of the happy end. It deals in fantasy, not reality. A small case in point: "They drive that way because they see it in American films", claimed Marcin. America, however, is the slowest driving nation on the planet. The speed limit is fifty-five miles and hour, which equates to barely a hundred kilometers. Not very fast. America is also probably the only country in the world where a driver will stop at an intersection stop sign in the middle of the night on a deserted plain. This is all a small point, indeed. But if America as a nation really wanted to export its way of life, few Europeans would be stupid enough to buy it. The American working week is an average of fifty hours, while the average vacation time for a year is nine vacation days. Meanwhile, approximately half of American households are also deeply in debt, and 64.5% of Americans are overweight (Chhun 2005: 1). Few Hollywood films promote this less than glamorous image and lifestyle, understandably. Censorship and sexual mores in American are more repressive than here, and there is a level of political correctness expected that most Europeans would find terribly restrictive. Add to this the fact that in exporting America Hollywood would have to choose which America to promote, making the task intractable. The greatly diverse U.S.A. has several main culturally different

regions, which have little in common other than the federal government that watches over them. Then one would have to alert the masses, but they would not care. The vast majority of Americans are not even aware of the fact that *Dynasty* is viewed in other countries, and could not care less. Some might be embarrassed on hearing this, and most have forgotten that show ever existed. Lastly, I know of no American who comes home after a day of work and has the inclination to spend their free time thinking up ways to promote Coke abroad. But they do spend plenty of time trying to ban it in schools. What is frustrating about the high visibility of American mass culture abroad for educated Americans can be summed up in the words of Professor Zdzisław Najder of the University of Opole: "I think that what is in Poland associated with America is for that civilization – let me use a strong word – derogatory. It is as if somebody developed their view of Poland based on the most popular television shows and *Superexpress* on the one hand, and *Nasz Dziennik* on the other" (Najder, quoted in Warzecha 2003: 22, author's translation). Imagine the horror.

What seems to be happening to Poland is not Americanization, but the normal dissonance and passing fashions inherent in a free democratic capitalist society in the global era. Yes, it has an American flavor to it, but in this age, as ever, it is normal that products from other countries are imported and consumed. In the U.S. of A. millions wake up to Nestle cereal, yet no one speaks of the "Switzerlandification" of America. Millions drive Toyotas, but do not fear Japanese cultural influence. Poland has little to fear, either. While there may have been a brief and uncritical acceptance of all things American after the fall of communism, this has been tempered to a considerable degree since. Most of my students are rather derisive when it comes to American mass culture, and rightly so in some cases. When there is choice some choose badly, and it is inevitable that they will be taken in and briefly fascinated by the undemanding aesthetic Hollywood pumps out. However, this does not mean Americanization. A country with Poland's past will only be Poland in the future. The forces of Polish history, culture, tradition, and religion are stronger than the products of a fantasy land a continent away, producing a vivid dream world that does not exist, and no one should believe in.

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It is Only a Matter of Style: Hollywood and the Myth of American Cultural Influence in Poland

The paper deals with the perceived hegemony of American mass culture in Poland and its effects on young people. It is argued that the supposed “Americanization” of Poland through Hollywood films does not constitute any serious threat to Polish national identity, and in fact has little to do with any genuine American cultural influence. Rather, it amounts to the passing adoption of American styles. Explaining that Hollywood is an internationally owned and operated force that works more to appeal to the tastes of the worldwide audience than America’s, it is concluded that the globalization of America cinema is more a threat to the U.S.A.’s national identity than that of other countries. Additionally, the fact that many Americans such as right-wing politicians and conservative Southerners and Midwesterners have viewed Hollywood antagonistically from its inception, indicates the degree to which it should not be considered as representative of American culture or the nation as a whole. Likewise, the content of Hollywood’s films has almost nothing to do with the reality of the country it happens to rest in. To illustrate the point that Poland does not suffer from Americanization, American and Polish national characteristics are

detailed to demonstrate the vast differences between the world views and cultures of these two nations and peoples. Ultimately, it is suggested that there has been no significant internal cultural impact on Polish youth due to contact with American entertainment, other than on the surface in the form of fashion and appearance. Also, they are becoming more and more derisive of American mass culture as time passes. Therefore, core Polish attitudes have not become more American and Polish culture, which has survived so much in the past, has very little to fear from the vapid Hollywood fantasy land a continent away.

Key words: *Americanization, Hollywood, culture, style.*