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Hey, world! Hollywood's coming

Review
Screen



Foreign successes at the Oscars set the seal on a growing phenomenon - the 'new globalism'. David Gritten explains how US movie bosses have finally woken up to the rest of the planet

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NOTORIOUSLY slow to react to events outside its boundaries, Hollywood has finally grasped what the rest of the world has known for years - that movie-making is an international business, and audiences will respond to compelling stories on film irrespective of their setting.



Anglo-American success: Julia Roberts parades her best-actress Oscar for Erin Brockovich - which sported a British co-star and film editor

That was the lesson learned from this week's Academy Awards. All the talk in Hollywood is about the "new globalism" in movies. The phrase was coined by Michael Barker of Sony Classics, the company that backed *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which, remarkably for a Chinese-language film, won the second-highest number of Oscars.

That typified the international flavour of this year's ceremony. Puerto Rican Benicio del Toro (in *Traffic*), playing a Mexican cop and speaking much of his dialogue in Spanish, was named best supporting actor, defeating among others Spanish actor Javier Bardem. Another best film nominee, *Chocolat*, boasted a French star (*Juliette Binoche*), a French setting (though it was shot mostly in England) and a Swedish director (*Lasse Hallstrom*).

Even the big Oscar movies that looked American turned out to be something else. *Gladiator*, the night's big winner, was shot in Europe and boasted a New Zealand star (Russell Crowe), an English director (Ridley Scott), a mainly British cast and a crew from no fewer than 22 nations.

Then there was Erin Brockovich, the story of an all-American legal secretary with an all-American cleavage battling a big, bad all-American corporation. It had an all-American star (Julia Roberts, a one-woman economic powerhouse who reliably generates more money than any actress since Shirley Temple) and two American studios financed it.

But even those two studios are not as American as they look. Universal is now owned by the French conglomerate Vivendi; Sony Pictures (some of us still think of it as Columbia) is part of the massive Japanese electronics company. And Roberts's performance was buttressed by two key British contributions - those of her co-star, Albert Finney (as an American attorney), and that doyenne of film editors, Anne Coates.

None of this is exactly new. Actors and film crews have wandered the globe for years pursuing film work, movies have long been financed in a variety of currencies, and Hollywood studios have been prey to foreign conglomerates (such as Australia's News Corporation, which owns 20th Century Fox) for more than a decade.

But the Oscars legitimised two welcome developments. One is the increasing tolerance of the American film-going public for films from different cultures. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon proved to be the huge breakthrough. Despite being a Chinese film with sub-titles, it has grossed an astonishing \$100 million in north America.

This growing acceptance of foreign stories and settings has been nurtured over the past 10 years - notably by Harvey Weinstein's company Miramax, with films such as *Il Postino*, *The Piano*, *Life is Beautiful* and *Chocolat*. They have detractors, but it is inconceivable that such "foreign" films would have been widely seen in American multiplexes in the Eighties.

The other news is that Hollywood has belatedly woken up to this fact. Studios are now actively searching out the right films set in distant parts. Again *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is the catalyst. Stylistically it may be seen as a one-off, but it has functioned as an alarm call to Hollywood: the mere fact that a film is Chinese in origin is no bar to success. Hollywood will now certainly buy up more Asian films. Sony already has a team of acquisition executives in Hong Kong, charged with hunting down Chinese-language films that can transcend cultural and national boundaries. Miramax has recently followed suit.

And given that China (along with India) is the last great untapped market for Western-made films, expect to see more English-language movies set in Asia. Miramax has already jumped on this bandwagon, and is remaking a film of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, starring Michael Caine and set in Vietnam.

Why is this happening? Market forces, of course. As Barker of Sony Classics noted this week, "The monetary constraints of financing motion

pictures has necessitated a variety of international partners."

This new thrust towards globalism coincides with a mood of uncertainty in Hollywood, as evidenced by the muted, scaled-down post-Oscar parties and celebrations. It's no wonder. Dozens of wealthy film industry types have been affected by reverses on the stock market. Impending strikes by actors and screenwriters this summer threaten to bring film production juddering to a halt. A string of American cinema chains, hampered by razor-thin profit margins, have declared bankruptcy.

Given that four of the five best-film nominees at the Oscars have grossed more than \$100 million at the US box office, you might wonder why the studios worry. Yet it's becoming increasingly hard for a film to make real money from the US market alone. Put it this way: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was acquired for a song, whereas Julia Roberts was paid \$20 million for starring in *Erin Brockovich*. Which film do you suppose was the most profitable? Herein lies the great appeal to Hollywood of the new globalism.

Foreign-language films can be bought up for peanuts, and English-language films with international settings have a good chance to capture audiences worldwide. This last point is crucial, for the share of the US box office in the global market has been steadily shrinking, and currently stands at about 40 per cent. The sure-fire way for a Hollywood-financed film to make money is to appeal to the whole world.

One hopes that the lesson is well learnt. For too long Hollywood has thrust upon the rest of the world a wearying string of films with narrow, parochial, American perspectives - the high school, the shopping mall, the basketball court. It's no surprise that audiences hunger to see stories from different cultures.

Ironically, this self-evident truth has been under Hollywood's nose for years. You would never know it to see films set in Los Angeles (or the footage of the rich, predominantly white, folks who attend the Oscar ceremony) but LA is a multi-cultural city. Half its inhabitants speak Spanish as their first language; there are huge communities from China, Korea, Armenia, everywhere in Central America. And they go to movies in their millions.

It's a welcome sign that Hollywood's power-brokers are finally casting an eye over films with truly international appeal. It's just bizarre that it took them this long.

[27 March 2001: \[International\] Gladiator slays Oscar rivals](#)