CULTURAL MIRROR OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: DISCOURSE OF CONSERVATISM IN HOLLYWOOD NARRATIVE

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Introduction

'When Gallup polls have asked Americans if they are satisfied with the way things are going in the US, the majority of Americans two-thirds of the time during the last two decades have answered "no." But, when asked if they are satisfied with their personal lives, 70-90% have consistently said, "yes." The American Dream is still a reality.' (Lauer, 1997: p. 27)

One external feature of classic Hollywood narrative is wish fulfillment. This frequently takes the form of a happy ending in romance, riches and fame. Also, to some extent, the narrative and stylistic formula of classic Hollywood was institutionalized in 1934 with the adoption of the Production Code. The code spelled out the moral value system behind the Hollywood formula and it insisted on support for law and order, the sanctity of marriage and the home.

It is often argued that optimism is one of the values shared among American nationals. Generally, it refers to the promised future for most of the population. Nevertheless, the term, if carefully observed, can reveal that the American optimism is not merely portrayed in the faith in the future, but also dispersed in the past, needless to say, in the present as well. First, the optimism for the past is almost synonymous with nostalgia in which one beautifies the past and affirmatively describes the social and cultural past. Second, the optimism in the present deals with the American ways of life and wealth as the best, as in the criticism from cultural imperialists, that leads to the political future in which the America is the only nation state that will survive.

A cultural approach is to make analysis of consumer products to interpret their representation systems and examine to what extent they reflect the concerns and preoccupations of a certain cultural group. The validity of this particular approach applied to Hollywood products should be high because Hollywood films are a form of popular culture that attracts all walks of life and are enjoyed by a broad cross-section of society. In defining the social context of popular culture, Fiske argues that the capitalist system does try to dominate the market and the consumer, but the public, though clearly subordinate to the commercial interests, does have an active role to play in the actual creation of popular culture (Fiske, 1989: pp. 1-2). Horwood also points out, as in the case of *films noir*, that the film makers were being led by their audience: *'They are usually resolved in favor of the status quo'* (Horwood: 1999, p. 16). Moreover, films inevitably show what was on the mind of the public because of the nature of industry (Palmer, 1993: p. xi). In this sense, then, it is possible to target at Hollywood products and re-speculate the degree of political discourse in the light of 'Americanism' or American

Conservatism to be more specific.

American conservatism is a combined project of several ideological principles. First of all, it is based upon jungle law of social Darwinism. It is the world where the weak become victims of the strong and the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Therefore, acquisition of wealth or American way of living is well encouraged and welcomed. Also, individual freedom has been a basic philosophy since the foundation of the nation. Progressivism based upon optimism is approved, and social as well as cultural and personal change are highly evaluated; as a result, American conservatism draws a line of demarcation from European traditions and reflects upon American Exceptionalism. Finally, retrospection is heavily characteristic of American conservatism which is closely related to optimism, and moral codes such as familism and patriarchalism are affirmed in American Conservatism.

The primary concern of this article, therefore, is to examine the representations of Hollywood products and explore to what degree they project the concerns and preoccupations of the US citizens, and to highlight some of the conservative political discourse of contemporary America—namely, from neo-liberalism to neo-conservatism.

II. *Early Contemporaries*

In the discussion of Hollywood films with regard to contemporary America, one should start with the Reagan-Bush era (1980-1992), for this is the era during which conservatism and right wing ideology rose to prominence as a sign of strong America. Simultaneously important is the fact that Regan raised optimism among the American nationals during his presidency. The economic situations also served as a tail wind for the Administration: its economic policies appeared spectacularly successful in reducing the uncontrollable inflation that had been the bane of the US citizens during the Carter's presidency, and created eighteen million new jobs and dropped the unemployment rate. Reagan advocates: *'If there is one thing we are sure of, it is that nothing is impossible, and that man is capable of improving his circumstances beyond what we are told is fact'* (Levy and Fisher ed., 1991: p. 1288).

Then, one should be able to generalize that the Hollywood cinemas produced during this period must have mirrored such powerful right wing discourse in the light of American optimism. It is true that Hollywood of this era was overwhelmingly characterized by 'nostalgia':

> *'The world-wide permeation of post-modernism prompted the retrospective tide of the 80s. Reagan forced his way by advocating power politics both in domestic issues and in foreign affairs… It was truly symbolic that Indiana Jones and its sequels (1981 to 1989), with their story background set in the late 1930s, were produced in the first year of the Reagan Administration'* (trans. Kato, 1996: pp. 109-110)

Historically speaking, the late 30s was indeed the time during which Hollywood industry was to reach its own peak. Besides *Indiana Jones*, *Back to the Future* and its sequels (1985 to 1990) were also produced nearly this era, and Dr. Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) went back to the era of frontier spirit in Back to the Future, Part III. Also in Part I of the same series, Marty McFly (Michael J. Fox) sees that problems of the present has attributed to the past when his parents had not even met. History surely is employed in these films in order to provoke

American identity just as that *'the political assertion of identities requires some authentification through reclaiming one's history'* (Woodward, 1997: p. 19). Heroism is directly presented (Parmer, 1993: p. xi) for the viewers to project themselves in these films in which protagonists pursue their goals by victory over their enemies in the background of 'good old days'. One can generalize that these active adventure movies, so-called swashbucklers, reflect upon the social and political momentum of the period: search for strong America in the past.

It is very true that Hollywood version of nostalgia has been disseminated throughout its industrial history, especially at the time of nation's economic recovery. When Hollywood industry reached its height of glory (or rather, its first peak) in 1930s, for instance, the States and the rest of the world were still in the aftermath of the Depression. There are, to say the least, two theoretical frameworks that explain Hollywood's prosperity of this era. One is that Hollywood functioned as the dream factory for the audiences. Powdermaker describes it as 'a caricature…of the business motives and goals of our society' (Powermaker, 1950: p. 314). *King Kong* (1933) would best specify his description of Hollywood's role. Heroism was projected rather metaphorically in this film as a form of modernism in the sense that people's fear was to be eliminated by advanced technology.

> *'The gigantic gorilla, King Kong, climbing the Empire State Building, was the symbolic figure of people's fear and anger toward their own society. However, their fear and anger were eventually defeated by the jet fighter, the representation of modern technology.'* (trans. Hamano, 1991: pp. 201-202)

In addition, a Walt Disney's film series, Silly Symphony, was produced during the time of New Deal campaign, and the series also reflected 'self-help' efforts with the 'weapon' of modern equipment, mirroring Roosevelt's message: *'my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself'* (Samuel Rosenman, ed., *The Public Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume Two: The Year of Crisis, 1933* New York: Random House, 1938: pp. 11-16). The theme song of the series was popular, and it enhanced the people's optimism (trans. Hamano, 1991: p. 203). It is presumable that during the hard times of massive unemployment, the whole nation entrusted Hollywood with their dreams and ideals.

The other theory which accounts for the flourish of Hollywood in this particular era is that the films simply had to reflect Americanism so as to respond to the social atmosphere and to enhance nationalism among its people. 1938 to 1939 should be noted especially as another key period of Hollywood industry. After the Depression, the American society waited a favorable change of its economic atmosphere. To put it more directly, the nation was expecting the end of the recession. According to Koto, most films produced during these two years were characterized by 'simply American', attempting to ignore the volatile Europe over which the Nazi had started expanding its militaristic influences (Kato, 1996: p. 112). It is true that American nationals were thoroughly absorbed in Americanism through movies that called for rediscovery of their national identity. In fact, blockbusters such as *Stagecoach*, *Young Mr. Lincoln*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Gone with the Wind* were all produced in these 24 months. *'65% of the population'*, Kato reports, *'spent their weekends in cinemas nearby'* (ibid. p. 113). Consequently, this period should be marked as the revival of Americanism. In other words, America reestablished its own identity after the recession, differentiating itself from Europe. It was the time when the rest of the world had begun being divided between the good and the evil around Nazi's Germany prior to World War II. Therefore, American people responded to

Hollywood products which dealt with the theme of 'America' at the time. If these socio-economic overlaps are taken into account, it is plausible to formulate that films which dealt with American nostalgia mirrored the social atmosphere at the time of economic recovery during the Reagan Administration.

Furthermore, some other films produced in this era were also characterized by conservative optimism. Films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Working Girl* (1988) can be observed merely as American success stories; however, these preserve the American version of Cinderella narrative, which was written in the patriarchal discourse. For example, Kelly criticized that *Working Girl* is conservative since the heroine (Melanie Griffith) chooses marrying the hero over starting her life anew in another city by herself (Kelly, 1988: p. 92). Also, in *Pretty Woman*, the climax comes when the protagonist, Vivian (Julia Roberts) was chosen by the wealthy hero (Richard Gere) as in the Cinderella Story. Consequently, these two films are representations of Americanism with females centered in the contents; it is impossible to deny the fact that the conservatism combined with American Dream that underlay in 1980s, was yet clearly observable in these products by showing ordinary people (females) achieving their successes or dreams.

It should be noted that main themes or primary interests Hollywood industry pursues do not lie in the so-called social minorities, such as women's issues, or ethnic/racial minorities but in the mainstream discourse of American optimism and conservatism, just as *Pretty Woman* and *Working Girl* were too much characteristic of patriarchal discourse. For instance, although *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is said to be the first Western film in which the language, customs, rituals, and values of Native Americans are accurately reproduced, this particular piece of work deserves praise only in the context that it was a politically correct film to be awarded Oscar. To put it more simply, no major Hollywood products have been produced from a Native American discourse. Furthermore, there have been very few major Hollywood films in which the true figure of Black population are disclosed. It is true that Black American film directors, such as Spike Lee, have been playing a conspicuous part in film industry presenting their works from a Black discourse: protagonists in their films often project their agonies, resignation, inferiority complex, and sloppiness in the society of White America, which sharply contrasts the Caucasian version of heroism presented in Hollywood blockbusters. It is worth an observation that most of Spike Lee's films, such as *She's Gotta Have It* (1985), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Jungle Fever* (1991) were known as Indies (films released from independent productions) (Inoue, 1998, Vol. 2: pp. 331-335). In other words, they are not the Hollywood mainstream. Consequently, major Hollywood products do reflect the optimistic view of American mainstream discourse; however, when it comes to ethnicity, anti-racism, and feminism, which are also part of American culture, actual film making has been left to independent production firms. Furthermore, the same would be applied to Michael Moor's products. Lions Gate of Canada and IFC (Independent Films Channel) became the distributing agencies for his controversial *Fahrenheit 911*, and multiculturalism and grassroots movements of political minorities have been reflected only by Indies.

III . *Later Contemporaries*

More recent products of Hollywood, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, reflect upon American's concerns and preoccupations based on the notion closely related to Armageddon (Revelation of John). Facing the end of 20th Century, films such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Deep Impact* (1997), and *Armageddon* (1998) share a common theme in this respect. That is, the whole earth would be facing the risk of existence either from a meteoroid's crash on the earth or from the invasion of aliens. Also, at the end of these films, the United States plays the key role for the survival of human race, which reflects neo-conservatism. Kagan maintains that the overwhelming military strength of the US is inevitable in order to protect the present world order; in the Statement of Principles of PNAC (Project for the New American Century), it reads:

> *'We seem to have forgotten the essential elements of the Reagan Administration's success: a military that is strong and ready to meet both present and future challenges; a foreign policy that boldly and purposefully promotes American principles abroad; and national leadership that accepts the United States' global responsibilities…Such a Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity may not be fashionable today. But it is necessary if the United States is to build on the successes of this past century and to ensure our security and our greatness in the next.'*
> (http://www.newamericancentury.org/statementofprinciples.htm)

It is not too much to say that these films produced at the end of century mirrored American future optimism based on neo-conservative discourse in the sense that the US is the only nation that counts when it comes to the future survival of humans. Of these three, *Independence Day* has best projected traditional Americanism in that the new beginning of the world is set on July 4, the date of the Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, the young generations who ardently admired the intruder as God (the representation of the destruction of traditions in the form of a new religion) were destined to be damned. *Deep Impact* projected the family ties as a significant value for survival. This particular value is well stipulated in the majority of melodramas in which the hero/heroine's happiness is promised after overcoming difficulties and saving their families (trans. Kato: p. 193; Williams, 1987: pp. 299-325). Finally, in *Armageddon*, the ragged hero (Bruce Willis) dies in order to save the earth community. Nevertheless, this film is strongly eloquent of the value of family ties and love: the hero dies for his daughter and her fiancé for the next generations to survive.

What should be noted in these contemporary films is the fact that their common enemies have been chosen from outside of the planet. Considering the transition of targeted enemies in the form of classical Hollywood narrative over time, one can easily generalize that it is parallel to the social concerns of the US. Despite some exceptions, it is generally true that Hollywood films used to deal with domestic issues in the battle between good and evil as in western films and gangster films (trans. Inoue, 1998: p. 349). Gradually, Hollywood industry sought the enemies outside the nation as the US started involving in the wars. Hollywood products made prior to World War II strengthened its color of good versus evil conflicts: obviously, America as 'good' and the Nazi's Germany as 'evil'. Kato reports that one out of every six films produced in 1942 were propagandizing anti-Nazism (trans. Kato, 1996: p. 110). Then, it is

possible to theorize that the more recent a product becomes, the more planetary issues are taken in: the common enemies are sought after in the outer space as in *Star Wars* (1977), *Alien* (1979), and other similar films. Nevertheless, the main themes that underlie these contemporary films remain unchanged: American identity as the world leader, and moralities based upon *'American ideologies, such as individualism, freedom, and independence'* (Okude, 1991: p. 77).

Viewed from a different perspective, it has been necessary for Hollywood to continuously create enemies for a commercial reason: in order to attract 'audience returning to the theater' (Maltby and Bowles, 1994: p. 107). Hollywood had to develop a form which was easy to understand from the audience's side: *'The stories involve straightforward contests between good and evil with easily recognizable heroes and villains. This good versus evil conflict is conclusively resolved, inevitably with evil defeated and good rewarded'* (ibid.). Moreover, whether it has been purposeful or accidental, Hollywood has assisted establishing American identities by presenting the battle between good and evil: *'Identity is relational, and difference is established by symbolic marking in relation to others'* (Woodward, 1997: p. 12), or the audiences have been asking for it. In either case, it is very true that, by showing evil inevitably defeated, Hollywood has been representing the national identity and America's optimism.

IV. *More Contemporaries*

Latest blockbusters from Hollywood are strongly characteristic of post modernity. For example, *Titanic* (1997), as a product of Hollywood, is observable from a post modern perspective, or the fall of modernism. The built-structure of the Boat was to be represented as social class divisions that had been explicit during the early years of modernization and industrialization. The bourgeois sit on the top deck and the proletariats (immigrant workers) gather at the bottom. In theory, if something disastrous ever happened, the lower occupants of the social hierarchy were to be victimized in short supply of lifeboats. However, when the Boat sank to the bottom of the sea, the whole societal divisions collapsed with it. 'Postmodernity', according to Lyotard, a principal social theorist, is the decline of a grand narrative; that is, the decline of modern project, the belief in continual scientific, technological and moral progress, the progress of knowledge, the Enlightenment notion of the infinite perfectibility or man through progress (Lyotard, 1987: pp. 82-83). The Boat was symbolic of the modern technology of the era, and the significance of the film lies in the review of modernity and in the advent of new interpretation of our contemporary society after the end of the Cold War. In this sense, the screen plot of Titanic incident may well overlap the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Another film, *I am Sam* (2001), took a new approach to focusing a minority of the intellectually underprivileged. The autistic protagonist, Sam Dawson (Sean Penn) works at a coffee shop while raising his daughter Lucy Diamond Dawson (Dakota Fanning), and attempts to get her back from the Child Welfare Center with legal assistance. Beatles' soundtrack covered by contemporary artists is employed for not only a retrospective reason but also a popularity reason as a result of research by Jesse Nelson (director) and Kristine Johnson (writer). Also, the audience is exposed to Starbucks logo approximately every 10-15 minutes of the film, until Sam gets a new job at Pizza Hut. The movie was not financially supported solely by the advertising of Starbucks and Pizza Hut; however conspicuous commercialism, global chain restaurants and coffee shops, for the first time in Hollywood

history, plays an important role of popularization of cultures in this film, illustrating our everyday life. In other words, the film can be observed as a piece of work in which a display of American cultural globalism is vaunted. However, because of bold commercial adaptation for this film, the focus on a minority group (the mentally challenged) is weakened. Mentioned as above, films of the socially marginalized are not the mainstream of Hollywood discourse.

Furthermore, with *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), Michael Moore (director) won the Oscar for the best documentary feature. He took up the high school shootings in Columbine as a touchstone for his illustration of the culture of guns and gun violence in the United States. Michael Moore at the Oscars spoke:

> *"We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction of duct tape or fiction of orange alerts we are against this war, Mr. Bush, Shame on you, Mr. Bush, shame on you. And any time you got the Pope and the Dixie Chicks against you, your time is up. Thank you very much."*
> (http://www.bowlingforcolumbine.com/reviews/oscarspeech.php)

As a commentator, Michael Moore is liberal, and humorously plays the role of a leftist in his own film; however, his membership of the National Rifle Association enabled himself to see Charlton Heston in person in the film, according to a film critic, Norm Schrager (2002 filmcritic.com). In other words, his leftist standpoint stands out in the scope of the national right-wing political discourse. Referring to American moralistic tendency, Thompson argues:

> 'In period of crisis, such as the Vietnam War, good and evil were located on different sides of the conflict by various groups. For some evangelical Protestant groups it was the Communist regimes of North Vietnam and its allies that incarnated evil; for more liberal religious groups it was the US military industrial complex that needed to be denounced as the seat of evil.' (Thompson, 1994: p. 15)

Moore's Oscar speech as well as the narrative of *Bowling for Columbine* reflects upon the socio-political concerns of the US morality issues. Huntington discusses: *'the emphasis on Americanism as a political ideology has led to a utopian orientation among American liberals and conservatives. Both seek to extend the good society.'* (Huntington, 1981: p. 154)

Therefore, one can conclude that, whether or not Moore is a leftist, the film itself reflects on 'American exceptionalism' that differentiates the US from old European identity in which both dystopia and utopia coexist (Thompson, 1994: p. 13). In short, Hollywood products may well represent the socio-cultural dichotomy of political discourse.

Furthermore, a Steven Spielberg's film, *Catch Me If You Can* (2003) illustrates nostalgia, familism, and patriarchal discourses. Representations of nostalgia utilized in this film are, to name a few: Pan American World Airways, Inc., automobiles in the 60s, fashions, and occupations such as pilots, doctors, and lawyers. It is a piece of picaresque in the sense that a villain is described as a poor hero, Frank Abagnale Jr. (Leonardo DiCaprio), set out on a runaway journey, whilst the presentation of the plot has a derisive tone against the wealthy and the authority, outwitting the FBI for four years. A villain cannot be a hero in a contemporary account; however, he/she becomes a hero in nostalgic memories.

Also, patriarchal familism is one of the main themes of this film. Every time Frank

reunites with his father, he has a slight hope that he can somehow use his illicit wealth to bring her mother back, always with a flashback scene in which his father used to sweep her off her feet and brought her as his wife. Along with familism, representations of patriarchal discourse are permeated throughout the film: female flight attendants flocking around pilots; housewives; criticism directed at abortion, etc. in the context of nostalgic 60s. A primary reason for popularity gain of nostalgia is the uncertainty that the complex crossover of diversified frames of references in our contemporary societies; also, only 'good' old days are presented with 'bad' old days kept back.

V． *Optimism and Popularity*

One last thing that should be added is the popularity of Hollywood products for the optimism they present to the viewers as a form of entertainment equipped with advanced technical effects such as SFX, sound effects, computer graphics, and pop/rock music with sound tracks. *'The media are leaders in the search for popular application of new technologies'* (Althen, 1988: p. 72). In interpreting Hollywood's role with regard to what America is, Maltby and Bowles write:

> *'It is therefore crucial that we understand the nature and function of entertainment… entertainment represents a pleasurable and therapeutic distraction from our more important concerns—the things we are obliged to do.'*   (Maltby and Bowles, 1994: p. 100)

Moreover, Hollywood's audience expects happy endings in the films they enjoy: *'the photoplay …to function in such fashion the screen story must contain elements that are emotionally satisfying'* (Richetson, 1938: p. 13). A possible account for why the films must contain something emotionally satisfying may endorse the other side of American optimism. In his In Search of America, Past and Present, Agawa, for instance, reports the worries and concerns that the White Anglo-Saxon America shares as a society, in which they live, has become gradually diverse:

> *'Where on earth is the States heading? Some of my American friends often sound pessimistic when talking about the country's future in the long run. These people have never believed that America's shared values are not longer valid. Rather, they are traditionalists and pan-Americanists. Nevertheless, more pessimistic, they believe, is the fact that the number of social groups which dare not to commonly share Anglo-Saxon morality has been on the rise.'* (trans: Agawa, 1997: p. 166)

There is no doubt, therefore, that Hollywood's products must satisfy their audiences with happy endings to appeal to the majority and sweep out their worries and concerns in order to maintain popularity.

VI． *Conclusion*

If one takes a brief look at the history of Hollywood industry, one can observe that the transition of enemies portrayed in its products is parallel to the social, cultural, and political

development of the US. That is, for the purpose of simple presentation and identity construction for American nationals, Hollywood has long maintained its Classical Narrative, especially in the conflict between good and evil in which heroes and heroines achieve their primary goals. By doing so, films Hollywood produces have mirrored the long tradition of American exceptionalism, differentiating American identity from old Europe. Furthermore, as a form of entertainment, Hollywood has satisfied the American audience in a variety of ways such as nostalgia for the past, success stories, the American Dream, happy endings, superior technical effects, heroism characterized by individualism, physical and mental strength, and familism or family ties. All of these factors in Hollywood products are based on American optimism that is also based on neo-liberalistic and neo-conservative discourse since the time of Reagan. As mentioned above, *Bowling for Columbine* stimulates the discourse of American exceptionalism whilst Michael Moore takes a stance of leftist argument. In this respect, Hollywood industry has reflected upon American conservatism and its political mainstream.

Discourses from the other minority perspectives, such as those of feminism, anti-racism and ethnic diversity, however, are almost all consigned to independent productions because the hue of entertainment is lessened. Still, gun control has long been a big debate inside the nation. Nevertheless, Hollywood takes the extreme right wing: in *The Unforgiven* (1992), for example, the gun itself 'Peace Maker' played the symbolic role to stabilize the security of a small town of California where the legislation of gun control bill was proposed (trans: Kato, 1996: p. 318). In these respects, the reflective degree of contemporary America upon Hollywood products is still limited to the mainstream discourse.

Alternative film forms, other than Hollywood narrative, were not available until the 60s, and the simplicity of the Hollywood formula provided an enclosed world of understanding. Consequently, a question will arise: with cultural globalization that has been brought into their already-diversified lives by other forms of media, will the US audiences be able to be fully exposed to and entertained by new forms of films so that they could be objective toward their society? The key is whether Hollywood will be able to enjoy monopoly in the 21st century as it has been so far since 1945, known as the year of *'American media conquest'* (Tunstall, 1977: p. 141). In other words, Hollywood should remain amenable to audiences who play as primary actors in the construction of meaning that forms a culture that whimsically counterworks against strong capitalism of media industries.

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