

Book Review: Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Power by Lee Artz

Jamie Ranger

St. Hugh's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, james.ranger@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk; jayranger@hotmail.co.uk

Abstract: Jamie Ranger reviews Lee Artz's 2022 book 'Spectacle and Diversity: Transnational Media and Global Power'.

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1. Introduction

If we take cultural imperialism as one of the primary media relations among nations in the 20th century, Artz argues that capitalism has changed and developed new means for its accumulation of wealth, and that these changes affect the global production of news and entertainment. The contention is that while the global media industry continues to produce and circulate images and information that influence mass culture insofar as it encourages certain beliefs and behaviours, there is diminishing evidence of US media dominating national or domestic media around the world (implying the long-term decline of hegemonic forces of Americanization). Whilst in previous decades Hollywood ostensibly ruled the Western cinematic landscape, saturating the international market and expanding eastward, recent trends in terms of capital shares in production and distribution suggest a less straightforward narrative of converging cultural and economic preferences. The suggestion here is that transnational production and distribution is growing in influence alongside a transnational media culture unrelated to US media imperialism.

2. Book Overview

The first chapter, "Global Entertainment: Not Yet the Democratic Age", provides a brief description of capitalist social relations and current neoliberal policies that provide the context for media production and content. The chapter is an authoritative, comprehensive and lucid account that describes the logic and development of capitalist market economics and frames neoliberalism as the political settlement that attempted to resolve inherent contradictions within the system. Neoliberalism is understood as a means of extending individualism and consumerism in civil populations at the ideological level, thus inevitably requiring the full force of media – described by Artz as purveyors of signs, symbols, and stories— to manufacture consent and normalise the transition to neoliberal practices and perspectives. Through the transnational and domestic merging of corporations, Artz persuasively argues that the new global structures of production and distribution have altered daily life and culture, in that neoliberal norms encourage the expression of cultural and personal identity through commodities (and

intellectual property) and normalise media entertainment as a general respite from the normalisation of alienating work.

Artz's analysis is focused on transnational corporations (TNCs), which differ from international and multinational corporations – an international corporation sells a product produced by workers in one nation to consumers in another; a multinational corporation operates in one nation and owns and operates subsidiaries in another; transnational corporations, by contrast, are capitalist partnerships jointly owned by multiple companies from different nations that produce products within different nations, distributing these products in each of the several nations in a 'localised' form to appeal to specific domestic audiences. With such an arrangement of material interests, to what extent can such ventures be thought to sustain neoliberal ideology?

The second chapter, "Cultural Imperialism and Transnational Media", unpacks the concept of imperialism (cultural, economic and military) and questions if cultural imperialism explains the actual activities of current media structures and practices. Transnationalism is introduced as a more accurate description of contemporary media and social class relations. The chapter criticises contemporary claims of cultural imperialism as too vague to adequately capture the lay of the capitalist land in the global media industry and criticises ideas of transmitting national cultural imperialism on the grounds that they fail to account for precisely what it is about the nation that its media intends to export: as Artz reminds us, popular culture is not equivalent to folk culture, so anything that is being exported internationally will always resemble some form of simulacra in its attempt to maximise familiarity with its intended audience. An extreme example that comes to mind is *Sex Education*, the Netflix show in which English teenagers go to an American high school (replete with American-style aesthetics that audiences have learned to familiarise themselves with through television) in north Wales. In terms of material analysis, it is argued that media institutions are moving into transnational partnerships because they have maximised their reach inside their domestic markets – thus it may be implied that it is best to understand transnational media as a consolidation of powers that is occurring out of necessity, rather than a global ideological resettlement.

The third chapter, "Media in India: From Public to Private to Transnational", summarises regulatory changes in India prompted by its national media lobby, which sought global media partners. Artz provides an exhaustive account of the transnational capitalist partnerships that operate within the Indian media industry. He suggests that dominant themes consistently appear in the most popular Indian action movies (action being the most popular genre): the notion that danger is a constant and universal concern, that average citizens are individually incapable of defending themselves, that only heroes with special skills are required to confront these threats, that any violence exercised by heroes in confronting these threats is morally justified, and that hierarchy and authority must be protected. Through these dominant themes – and the feedback loop of audience expectation for the genre and filmmakers making genre films for an expectant audience – exists an underlying theory of justice in the abstract. In the fourth chapter, "Crouching Tigers: Transnational Media with Chinese Characteristics", the mediascape in China is found to be slowly but continually opening to foreign media partnerships. Acknowledging the official annual limit of 36 foreign movies allowed for release in China, transnational media partnerships are integral for the global media market's expansion into the domestic market. Across Chinese cinema, Artz contends that there are also themes that are regularly explored in domestic blockbusters: danger once again lurks around every corner, citizens are once again incapable of self-defence, individual heroes (again customarily marshalling fantastical powers) can defend

the civilian population – heroes that must exercise violence without moral or legal constraints – and reinstating the status quo is possible once this violence is exercised and pre-existent authorities are restored. Artz sees neoliberal celebration of individual exceptionalism and the general disempowerment of the masses in both these movie markets.

Chapter Five, “Latin America: From Telenovelas to Transnational Media”, takes a more expansive approach to illustrating TNMC operations on the continent. Given that there is no single primary TNMC in the region, the several media and their more global partnerships are presented to demonstrate that transnationalism is not a primarily global, nor singularly dominant, form of capitalist partnership. Chapter Six, “The New Frontiers of Europe: Transnational Media Partners”, describes and assesses evolving regional media transnationalism as the European Union – comprising 28 nation-states with 24 official languages – grapples with national identities, multiple languages, and its common market.

Chapter Seven, “Hegemony: Consent and Desire for Transnational Entertainment”, returns to the globalisation of neoliberal capitalism (deregulation of public interests, privatisation of public resources and collaboration among companies across borders), and discusses the relations between the media structures of transnational partnerships and the content of transnational productions as the outcome of participation and consent by national media for transnational relations. Overall, these new social relations of productions organise management and labour within class relations that are neither dependent on a particular nation-state nor on the specificities of a particular culture. These joint productions thrive under neoliberal conditions of temporary and precarious labour, whilst the media products of transnational arrangements appropriate cultural diversity wherever possible to maximise the scope of recognition for its audience, and thus increase their profits.

3. Reflections

Artz is sceptical of conventional accounts of western cultural imperialism from the outset – the cultural homogeneity of American entertainment products may account for its domination in western English-language media ecologies, but its allegedly hegemonic character becomes more implausible once investigations of domestic media markets are undertaken. It reminds me of the old arguments surrounding globalisation of the ubiquity and sameness of corporate products – whilst it is true that there are McDonalds around the world, the extent to which McDonalds has to change its menu and market strategies to suit local tastes and preferences means that there is enough familiarity underneath the golden arches for a tourist to recognise the fast food chain, but the experience still feels as though it must necessarily respond to its context in order to thrive (and of course, the priority is to make money, not to spread cultural imperialism). The issue here is not that McDonalds offers the same thing and tastes the same everywhere around the world, it is that regardless of what is offered, McDonalds as a corporate firm remains the primary profiteer.

The importance of Artz’s intervention into conventional narratives surrounding media production is that it is an urgent response to narratives that argue for the hegemonic position of American cultural imperialism as well as those that argue it is in decline, for the latter narrative may imply that our contemporary media settlement fails to adequately reproduce neoliberal norms of production and consumption. However, Artz demonstrates the opposite: transnational joint ventures have contributed to the consolidation of pre-existent domestic media giants. The transnational capitalist holds no allegiances to nation or culture.

Artz suggests that cultural imperialism has been dropped in favour of a collaborative approach to facilitating the acceleration of profit along neoliberal regulative lines, and as such, 'US media' or 'British media' or 'French media' no longer exists in the previously conventional, holistic and unified sense. In doing so, transnational media corporations have strengthened neoliberal capitalism, not weakened it, through this rejection of cultural imperialism: culturally accessible entertainment is useful in reproducing national and cultural subjectivities that draw upon nostalgic familiarity. Transnational relations have not improved democratic communication between cultures, despite the appearance of culturally diverse characters, locations and languages, for their purpose is merely to package old products with the diverse spectacle of the new and to reinforce the existing domestic flavour of neoliberal capitalism.

Artz's book is a comprehensive account of the global state of play, with detailed accounts of transnational partnerships and hegemonic corporate actors in domestic and international markets across the world – it is also an urgent corrective to intuitive yet ultimately unsubstantiated conceptions of US (and assorted domestic) cultural imperialism in contemporary media ecologies and the notion that the global marginalisation of Hollywood will necessarily lead to the marginalisation of the neoliberal capitalist ideology that Hollywood is customarily associated with reproducing.

In the days before the release of a new Marvel movie, it is customary for a few clips – whether officially sanctioned teasers or 'accidental leaks' – to emerge online. A movie clip circulated depicting Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) flinging magical spells at a hostile cyclopic monster antagonist causing havoc in downtown New York. However, appearing in a 'blink-and-you'll-miss-it' cameo is a yellow newspaper box with Chinese characters written down the side. It was quickly revealed through Internet sleuthing that the newspaper box belonged to *The Epoch Times*, a far-right publication with an international readership and a highly controversial reputation. In the US, *The Epoch Times* has faced criticism for spreading right-wing misinformation and conspiracy theories like QAnon, and on the domestic front, it is primarily known for its fanatical ultra-nationalist opposition to the Chinese Communist Party and its connections to the cultish Falun Gong religious movement.

Despite prompting a negative op-ed in response from pro-CCP news outlet Global Times and a kneejerk response that at the time of writing leaves the potential release of the movie in China uncertain (Bro 2022), it is interesting to note that the newspaper box was likely left there by human error. Director Sam Raimi opted to shoot many scenes on location in the city, rather than exclusively on sets, and *The Epoch Times* have carved out a niche American presence. Reports suggest that elements of a Taiwanese character were already adjusted in the script to accommodate Chinese political positions in order to avoid censorship (Baker-Whitelaw 2022), so one assumes that the one-second presence of a newspaper box to the left of the screen as Doctor Strange weaves his magic was not intended to act as an endorsement of Chinese reactionary movements, given that the producers seem intent on doing what is necessary to ensure safe passage to the Chinese market. Transnational approaches could potentially stop such gaffes for capitalists in the future, as Chinese capital's involvement in the production and distribution of films aimed at their market would allow cultural sensitivities to be understood and amendments made. But to what extent does acquiescence to domestic particulars lead to an increasing accommodation of different perspectives to the point of sanding off the edges of a creative work?

A problem transnational media may imminently confront is one of authenticity: if it is true that the spectacle of diversity operates to provide an illusion of familiarity and

recognition for domestic markets, how may this sort of custom increasingly strain audience credulity, especially in the age of social media? There are phenomenally articulate denunciations of tokenism and misrepresentation written by cultural critics both inside and outside the academy and the increasing homogeneity of reproducing certain themes, tropes and character models so as to appeal to as many people as possible may lead to blockbuster blandness, and thus the problem of disinterest (especially given the highly competitive and niche alternatives available to contemporary media consumers – itself a consequence of neoliberalism). Transnational firms may avoid minor problems such as the Doctor Strange incident with the newspaper box, but will they be able to overcome the problems of their own imaginative stagnation?

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About the Author

Jamie Ranger

Jamie Ranger is a doctoral candidate at St. Hugh's College, University of Oxford in the Department of Politics & IR. He writes on the politics of speed, technics, media, space and radical democratic theory. He tweets from @jamieandhisego.