

Book review

Smith, I. R. 2017. *The Hollywood meme: Transnational adaptations in world cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 192 pp.

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By writing *The Hollywood meme*, Iain Robert Smith answers the call for a more complex understanding of what exactly happens when Hollywood products are used, appropriated, remade or even stolen by filmmakers from other cultural contexts. To better investigate the multifaceted cultural dynamics that form the basis of the transnational dissemination of film, he puts the notion of “inter-relationship” central. As such, Smith avoids the pitfall of sustaining the hegemon-victim dichotomy, and instead succeeds in tracing the “global in the local” (p. 22). For this purpose, the author starts with a theoretical chapter in which a new comparative model is conceived in order to analyze transnational adaptations. One of the key elements of this model, apart from a close analysis of the hybrid cultural text, is the embedment of this adapted text in its socio-historic context. Thus, in order to test and establish his theory, Smith adds three chapters in which Turkish (1971–1980), Filipino (1972–1986), and Indian (1998–2010) adaptations, respectively, of Hollywood products are scrutinized. Each of these chapters, examining four representative case studies, together points to the plethora of ways and methods that are used to adapt and rework American cinema.

The author achieves an excellent balance between a well-established epistemology and a considerable amount of empirical imperative. By emphasizing bottom-up perspectives, he nuances models of domination and resistance, and creates a new framework that offers a more critical lens through which one can study the different manners in which American films get adapted, evolved and mutated. The author tempers theories of ‘Americanization’ and ‘cultural imperialism’ by pointing to the agency and creativity of other cultural contexts in the form of localized production and reception, relying on theories of social anthropology and cultural studies. Hence, the author acknowledges not only the process of encoding, but just as much the process of decoding. Coined by scientist Richard Dawkins, Smith uses the term ‘meme’ as a metaphor for tracing adaptations across different cultures. He defines it as “a unit of culture which spreads and replicates, transforming itself to fit with whatever new habitat it finds itself in” (p. 31). By using this metaphor, he not only distances himself from often meaningless debates on fidelity, but simultaneously suc-

ceeds in making sense of the worldwide dissemination and adaption of both American filmic texts and the industry in which these are created.

By adopting an integrative approach, combining production, textual, and reception analysis, Smith obtains a holistic image of the transnational practice. For instance, he suggests that most often plots get adapted when the “source text is not well-known in the host country” (p. 147). This happens in Bollywood, where plots are ‘Indianized’, as well as accumulated with extra sub-plots, just because there is a relative lack of American distribution in the country. However, when the adaptation takes an opportunistic form, as in trying to associate itself with a well-known original, the iconography in particular is oftentimes borrowed as an exploitable element for the familiarized audience. The latter is shown in the Turkish and Filipino cases, where the adaptations rely on recognition and “reflect both an awareness of US media and a desire to self-consciously imitate and comment upon it in those contexts” (p. 147). Furthermore, the author illustrates the minor role of copyright laws in deciding the specific type of adaptation, while it does play an important role in defining the degree to which the source text is reworked. In this way, the ‘meme’ is not the ‘selfish’ one – as described by biologist Dawkins – that leaps from brain to brain, but one that actively gets deciphered and is embedded in a specific social, cultural and historic context.

The question is, however, whether or not the cases used are relatable to today’s industries (they were, for example, all unlicensed borrowings). Smith acknowledges this, saying that the predominant forms of transnational adaptation practiced by the three socio-cultural contexts “have slowly died out as industrial changes and alterations to the legal framework have changed the broader context of production” (p. 145). Therefore, not only is there a need to test the phenomenon of the ‘Hollywood meme’ in a contemporary context, but also in more differentiated socio-cultural contexts, that is, in different film industries through time. The title of the book thus not only reveals the central thesis which is put forward by the author, but also the provisional interdependence between this claim and the socio-cultural context of Hollywood. As a consequence, it is unclear if the metaphor of the ‘meme’ is also applicable to other, smaller contexts and lesser known films, since it seems that the connotation of the term unveils a notion of reputation or prior success. That is to say, all the examples used by Smith are notable and popular films, going from ‘Spiderman’ to ‘The Godfather’, which is of course evident, since the author chose to analyze the adaptation of Hollywood films. However, does this imply that transnational adaptations are always made of (a combination of) famous texts, thereby excluding lesser known works? Is there only a ‘Hollywood meme’, or just as well a ‘European meme’, or even a broader ‘transnational meme’? Nevertheless, *The*

Hollywood meme proves that by analyzing transnational adaptations, a myriad of insights come to the surface about different cultural contexts and their corresponding film industries, but foremost about filmmakers' ideas and constructions of these cultural identities and ideologies. Consequently, the book is an interesting read for academics working in (popular) genre studies, studies of transnational adaptations and remake studies, as well as for people who want to know more about the Bollywood remake of 'Memento', or the teaming up of James Bond and Batman in the Filipino 'James Batman'.