

Hollyworld: Space, Power and Fantasy in the American Economy. *By Aida Hovic.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002. 256 pp. Photographs. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-801-43926-4.

Reviewed by Lary May

At the start of a new century, an unprecedented global economy has emerged that intersects with multiple cultures and a system of mass communications. Audiences in Asia, Europe, and Latin America often watch the same television shows and films, emulating the fashions and consumer goods associated with American stars like Tom Cruise or Julia Roberts. The demand generated by this global cultural system supports the production of consumer goods promoted by multinational corporations that span the globe. The virtue of Aida Hovic's *Hollyworld* lies in its exploration of how the entertainment network and global distribution systems have emerged and become intertwined. Hovic's thesis is that the personal desires spurred by the consumer culture centered in Hollywood drive the global economy and allow dominant groups to exercise power over their audiences' taste and politics. Movies, television shows, and their spin-offs in advertising, theme parks, and hotels situated in Las Vegas, Orlando, Tokyo, Paris, and other cities all bear the marks of this cultural network. Hovic sets out to explain how this globalized culture functions and the meaning it has for private and public life. Her conclusion is that the fantasies produced in Hollywood reinforce existing power relations, both personal and political. This thesis, though highly debatable, warrants our attention for the issues it raises.

Hovic's analysis is based on a traditional premise of Marxist scholars: that shifts in economic production determine which cultural ideas are promoted in the realms of the arts and the media. In her most successful chapters, she demonstrates that Hollywood has undergone three structural changes in the organization of movie production and distribution. Drawing on the work of scholars who have examined the rise of the Hollywood studios from 1915 to 1960, she argues that, during this first phase, film producers organized their production, supply, and distribution networks, creating several large, integrated firms. In order to control their audiences' tastes, the studios also relied on censorship and the star system.

The second stage, argues Hovic, emerged in the aftermath of the anticommunist crusade of the fifties. Increasingly, studio leaders gained power to police their own artists' private and political lives. However, this effort, as she accurately notes, removed from films the themes that had attracted audiences to movies in the thirties and early forties. Soon audience disinterest in films unrelated to their lives led to a rapid decline in markets at home, which generated a shift in power relations. Increasingly, global marketers and their agents, rather than older studio leaders,

oversaw the dispersal of film production away from Los Angeles to sites such as Wilmington, North Carolina, and Vancouver, Canada. Hovic persuasively demonstrates that this second phase created a different type of film industry, where multinationals such as Time/Warner and Sony/Columbia fused films to Disney-type theme parks, hotels, television shows, toys, and clothing. In the third stage, which emerged during the 1990s, new producers fought back, turning increasingly to digital technology in order to regain control from the distributors.

By dividing a century of Hollywood history into three stages, Hovic elucidates major turning points in the business of Hollywood moviemaking. Parts of this story have been told previously. Hovic's central contribution is the combining of a number of isolated studies to create a fresh conceptual framework. Unfortunately, in her attempt to fit Hollywood history into this thesis, she often adopts an overly abstract style of writing that can be difficult to follow. The quest to make Hollywood history conform to her theory does not take into account the autonomy of art and audiences. Take one crucial question: why did American popular culture succeed where others failed? This cannot be explained, as Hovic assumes, only by the power of movie producers and distributors to control production and marketing factors. Hovic never asks whether the worldwide appeal of contemporary American popular culture can be explained by anything other than the economic power exercised by distributors and multinational corporations. Nor does she examine why so many officials and corporate leaders in the United States and other countries have viewed American popular culture less as a means for controlling their population than as a subversive force undermining their power, particularly over the young. For example, the novelist Salman Rushdie, in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *The Fury*, explored why American musicians and filmmakers developed a popular art that appealed across national boundaries in India, England, and the South Pacific. Rushdie shows that commercial countries, such as Great Britain and France, promoted high culture that failed to attract mass audiences in their colonies or at home. Yet, in the twentieth century, it was only the popular art of America that appealed to the young of all classes and subverted the authority of local and global elites alike. Why does this transnational appeal of American popular art occur?

Hovic's theoretical presuppositions do not make room for these questions. In tune with her unexamined claim that producers and distributors who control the economics of the film industry impose their fantasy products on the public, it follows that the consumer's sovereignty is, as she asserts, just "myth." Given this view of a passive public, Hovic ignores the fact that filmmaking has often been an unstable market, where artists rose and fell in terms of their capacity to cater to shifts in audience taste. At key moments, neither the old producers nor the new distributors were able to anticipate consumer demand and impose their products at will.

Major filmmakers and producers like Frank Capra, Steven Spielberg, William Friedkin, Francis Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich, and Michael Cimino have made films backed by large studios and distributors that failed miserably, leading to the loss of millions of dollars, and even bankruptcy, by firms that backed their work. This hardly describes a situation where the control of key economic factors would guarantee success.

At the same time, Hovic does not acknowledge that production and distribution systems have never been as seamless and monolithic as she would have us believe. The studio system itself was created in the late teens and twenties by formerly ostracized Jewish entrepreneurs, who triumphed over a hundred other firms by catering to a new audience composed of previously divided groups that shared a desire for a revolution in manners and morals. Following the success of the West Coast studios, firms rose, and then fell, because their executives made films that failed miserably at the box office. Over the course of the century, fresh companies and innovative artists as diverse as Charles Chaplin, Frank Capra, William Wyler, Oliver Stone, the Coen Brothers, John Sayles, Stanley Kubrick, and Clint Eastwood retained their control over production because they alone made films that major studios and distributors had ignored or shunned. Further, although Hovic assumes that Hollywood moviemakers promoted standard ideas, figures like Will Rogers, Oliver Stone and Charles Chaplin were praised or condemned because they promoted, on screen and off, views that challenged economic inequality and normative mores.

What is missing, in other words, from Hovic's book is an awareness of both the power of audiences and artists to influence production and the uniqueness of the mass culture that emerged in the United States. She fails to address these factors because she draws too heavily on several interrelated theories from cultural studies and Marxism that reinforce the view of a passive public and a lack of artistic autonomy. Nonetheless, this is an important book that brings significant arguments and theories to bear on an important subject. When Hovic moves away from imposing her theory on complex evidence, she offers in this book a stimulating treatment of a very significant development of our time: the rise of an unprecedented global media system and its impact on our society.

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