Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Production: A Tale of Two Films

Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh

Hybridity, Hybridization and Global Culture

Globalization has been seen as a process, but also a project; a reality, but also a belief (Mattelart, 2002). There is continuing debate over its onset, definition and end result. Many believe that a global culture will emerge with the rise of globalization. Yet opinions are divided over what the nature of this culture will be whether it will be a single, homogeneous system that is characterized by convergence and the presence of the universal in the particular (Wallerstein, 1990), or whether it will be an ensemble of particulars that features long-distance interconnectedness (Hannerz, 1996). With the rise of post-colonialism, the concept of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) has become a new facet of the debate about global culture in the social sciences.

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, opens up what he calls a third space within which elements encounter and transform each other (Young, 1995; Papastergiadis, 2000, p. 170). It is, at the same time, the site of struggle and resistance against imperialist powers (Kraidy, 2002, p. 316). With the goal of abolishing the distinctions between center and periphery, and other forms of binarism, this post-colonial interpretation of cultural change is a significant departure from the linear diffusion model of the West to the rest. It directly challenges the idea of essentialism, according to Pieterse (1995, p. 64), because it unsettles the introverted concept of culture, a concept that underlies ideologies such as romantic nationalism, racism and cultural essentialism. It helps to release us from the boundaries of nation, community, ethnicity or class, while presenting a kaleidoscope of collective experience in motion.

In the globalization debate, hybridization presents yet another scenario for the outcome of cultural globalization besides hegemonic Westernization and postmodern diversity. The concept of hybridization, however, falls short of acknowledging structural inequalities, and
has allegedly become a neocolonial discourse that is complicit with transnational capitalism (Dirlik, 1997; Kraidy, 2002, Friedman, 2000, p. 3). Another, perhaps more fundamental, weakness of the concept of hybridity lies with its intellectual power. The histories of the hybridization of metropolitan cultures, as Pieterse (1995, p. 64) indicated, show that hybridization, with its downturns and upswings, its go-slow and its turns of speed, has been taking place all along. Moreover, hybridization is not unique only to certain societies; the creolizing spectrum, as Hannerz pointed out, extends from the First World metropolis to the Third World village (Hannerz, 1987, p. 555). Hybridity, therefore, is the ongoing condition of all human cultures, which contain no zones of purity because they undergo continuous processes of transculturation, as Rosaldo (1995, p. xv) concluded. In this sense, hybridization is a tautology, and globalization has brought about nothing more than the hybridization of hybrid cultures.

The paucity of communications research on this topic indicates the ontological and political quandaries that are inherent in using the concept as an analytical device (Kraidy, 2002, p. 317). Nowhere can we find more convincing and abundant evidence for the hybridization of the hybrid than in cultural products, as imitation, borrowing, appropriation, mutual learning, and representation erode all possibilities for authentic cultural production. In an interview with the New York Times, Baz Luhrmann, the Australian director of the Hollywood film Moulin Rouge, admitted that the idea to combine high comedy, high tragedy and song and dance in that film was deeply influenced by popular Hindi, or Bollywood, films (Shome and Hegde, 2002, p. 184). Bollywood films, in turn, draw on mythological epics, classical, folk, and modern theatre, and MTV and Hollywood for inspiration, and thus are hybrids in themselves (Ciecko, 2001, p. 125). To those in the business of cultural production, boundaries and restrictions serve to stifle, rather than enhance, creativity.

The issue here is not one of finding evidence for hybridization in cultural products, but, given the globalized production practices in the cultural industries, of discovering the terms and conditions under which it takes place, the way in which hybridization has been achieved, and the cultural features that the end products exhibit. As Chan pointed out (2001, p. 4), we are experiencing a give and take among cultures that encounter each other, a multifaceted and complex working of forces. However, nagging questions remain about who has given and taken what, what has been the result of such give and take within the exist-