

## **Movies and cultural diversity**

By Benoit Bouquin

Yesterday morning, as I was riding my bicycle on my way to the supermarket, a group of teenagers started screaming at me in English: "Hello, Mister!" "How are you, Mister?" I was first amused to see young people so eager to demonstrate their English proficiency, but this comic encounter left me later with a bitter aftertaste: one more time in Taiwan, I was mistaken for an American. Not that I have anything against my dear friends from the United States, but it is always somewhat frustrating to picture yourself through other people's stereotypes.

Stereotypes are maybe one of the most widely shared features of human beings, and on this issue a Frenchie like me has nothing to pride himself about. As I was making fun of this Taiwanese equation that "White" equals "American", I realised that I also had my share of misconceptions about foreigners. For instance, it took me quite a long time to realise that Asian people living in Paris were not all Chinese, and it is only after several years that I realized that the fried spring rolls that I had been eating with delight in Asian restaurants were not a Chinese dish but a Vietnamese one.

I felt somewhat ashamed at the discovery of my own ignorance about foreign habits and ways of life, and this convinced me to launch a crusade against the clichés and items of conventional wisdom that we often take for authentic knowledge about the other. Not an easy task, I must confess. Look at history programs in schools: obsessed with the heroic task of instilling notions of national identity and pride, they leave quite a sparse room for teachings on other cultures and civilisations. So apart from the happy few who can spend their free time travelling around the world, most of us are condemned to rely on media if they wish to learn about other cultures. And here is the bug that bothers me: media are often a distorting mirror of foreign cultures, which are typically reduced to a set of clichés, not always devoid of xenophobic accents.

Another problem is the difficult access to cultural diversity in the media. Take movies for instance. How many non-Hollywood movies have you seen last year? Well, if you live in Taiwan, probably not many. Except for a few institutions such as the Taipei Film House, or for a couple of international movie festivals, it is Hollywood on every menu. The last fifteen years have seen the share of Asian movies shrink in the local box office, and now American big studio productions have the lion's share in the movie industry revenue: a trend that is not likely to change in the future, considering the lack of policies encouraging cultural diversity.

I had the chance to grow up in Paris, a city that, despite its quite unaffordable living expenses, has the advantage to be crowded with little independent cinemas, where you can see, and usually for a cheap price, movies from other times and places. You might object that my taste for Iranian and Kazakhstan movies are just another illustration of my highbrow cultural tastes, and that I am part of an ultra-minority of snobbish people like me who delight themselves in watching four-hour long Hungarian black and white movies. Well, maybe you are right: after all, why adopt cultural policies that encourage the distribution of movies that nobody is ever going to see? Lots of foreign movies are often quite hermetic to audiences, who do not necessarily share the values and cultural codes embedded in such films. Those who have made the experience of watching a Bollywood movie know what I am talking about.

However, a country does not need to adopt volunteer policies to encourage the display of movies from different cultural horizons: the capitalist logic might be quite a sufficient incentive for that. Take China with its fast developing market for entertainment products: why not produce some movies that display Chinese values and ways of life, and which might be profitable in the Asian market while educating at the same time other folks about an Eastern civilization that is widely unknown to them? Well, I am not the first one to bump into this million-dollar idea: there is a precedent, and it is called *Mulan*. *Mulan*: an exemplary story of a girl who enrolls in the army to relieve her ageing father; a folk tale that every Chinese person has known from childhood. *Mulan* seemed to provide the perfect storyline for Disney to enter the Chinese market and sell millions of tickets; however, it performed rather poorly in the Chinese box-office. The reason? Despite all the good will of the filmmakers, despite the overall "oriental" aesthetics of the movie, reflected in its soundtrack or in the drawing style, the movie did not reflect accurately the original meaning of the story. The Chinese makeup did not fool the local audience, who rejected the transplant of Western values on the original script. *Mulan*, this daughter going to war by filial piety, had become something that spectators could not recognize: a feminist lost in an archaic world of hysterical matrons, a symbol of independence in a universe of male domination. Cultural hybridity needs a sense of nuance and delicacy that was clearly missed by *Mulan* producers. More successful in this crossing of cultures are the movies of Ang Lee. Take a traditional Chinese kung-fu novel, and rewrite the script to add the romance elements that captivate Western spectators, and you have *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The success of this movie lies in the very nuanced and careful way in which the director Ang Lee tried to make the plot understandable for a Western audience without departing from the Chinese elements of the story. As a Taiwanese director that moved early to the United States, Ang Lee has built himself a double culture that enables him to build bridges and new understandings between different value systems. Other directors have taken the same path: think of the way that Emir Kusturica or Tony Gatlif have reconstructed our imaginary representation of gypsy people, traditionally depicted in Europe basically as thieves or social parasites. Through their written or filmic testimonies, nomadic artists of the 21st century are our best guides to the distant, the foreign, the other. But there is still a lot to be done. In a world where people and cultures are more and more intertwined, we still have too little testimonies of these fascinating or dramatic experiences that can be immigration, exile and cultural hybridity. Immigrants are often the second-class citizens of our globalized world, and although they often live at our doorstep, the lack of representation of these people in our media and objects of popular culture only reinforces the impression that they live in a distant or separate world. I think that the movie industry has a particular responsibility in bringing to us distant cultures that we ignore everything about. After all, films have historically been used quite as a means for National propaganda. It is time that they assume another historical mission: that of introducing to us other cultures and fighting our stereotypes.