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Global capital, global labor, and global dominance: The case of *xXx: Return of Xander Cage*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the movie, *xXx: Return of Xander Cage*, produced to attract global audiences and increase global investments in Hollywood, by examining its production, financing, marketing, and distribution practices. The aim of the paper is to point to a shift in the way global Hollywood operates, exploits, and maintains its economic and cultural dominance. It explores *Return of Xander Cage* as a case study of how particular Hollywood films are now being produced for the influential Chinese and Indian markets by using the resources of the target nations to counter competition from these same markets.

Hollywood loves a sequel. All one has to do is look at the list of blockbusters each summer for the last decade or so to see evidence of this. The 2017 film, *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* (hereafter *Return of Xander Cage*), is an especially illustrative example of the quest for a successful sequel as it complicates the traditional logic of imitation. The third edition of the *xXx* franchise brings back Vin Diesel as extreme-sports super-agent Xander Cage along with an international cast consisting of Deepika Padukone, Donnie Yen, Kris Wu, Tony Jaa, and Ruby Rose (Mendelson 2017a). Paramount Pictures produced the movie with a budget of US\$85 million (Box Office Mojo 2017a). Although the movie earned only US\$44.9 million in North America, it amassed another US\$303 million worldwide, with China contributing US\$164 million, Russia-CIS bringing in US\$10.3 million, and Brazil accounting for US\$6.2 million (Box Office Mojo 2017a). It earned US\$8 million in India within two weeks of its release (Box Office Mojo 2017a). The earnings seem to follow the nationalities of the cast, which included two Chinese actors, a Bollywood actress, and a cameo by Brazilian football player Neymar Jr.

Paramount executives were not concerned about the movie's dismal domestic performance as they were confident of earning global revenues (Mendelson 2017b). Apart from the international cast, which consisted of A-list Chinese and Indian actors, Paramount pushed for localized marketing in China and India, and it paid off (Jha 2017a; Mendelson 2017a). The day the before the movie released in North America, and three weeks before it hit screens in China, Shanghai Film Group (SFG) and Huahua Media agreed to invest US\$1 billion in Paramount that would finance 25% of the studio's films for three years (Toonkel 2017).

The transformation of Hollywood blockbusters into global events to extract revenue from various sources is a known phenomenon (Author removed 2007). However, *Return of Xander Cage* appears to have been made for a very specific revenue source: the expanding

and untapped but highly profitable markets of China and India. This paper analyzes the movie as a popular global entertainment text (Mirrlees 2013), produced to attract global audiences and increase global investments in Hollywood, by examining its production and distribution practices. The aim of the paper is to point to a shift in the way global Hollywood operates, exploits, and maintains its economic and cultural dominance in the face of potential challenges from competitors in those same markets. It explores this shift through a case study of *Return of Xander Cage*, a text produced by a studio in a mature neoliberal market (United States of America), aimed at particular untapped developing markets (China and India), using resources of the target nations to reap profits and maintain the political economic power of global Hollywood blockbusters, specifically sequels. It reveals the movement of resources in an information age of global capitalism and New International Division of Cultural Labor (NIDCL) (Miller et al. 2005), and how labeling *Return of Xander Cage* as a ‘Hollywood blockbuster’ conceals these movements to maintain Hollywood’s global dominance through its production, financing, marketing, and distribution business practices.

While Mirrlees (2014: 29) examined the original xXx film and its content as a form of “global imperial pop culture,” this paper focuses on the global economic practices utilized to sell the third movie in the franchise specifically to Chinese and Indian audiences. China’s movie box office is expected to become the “largest theatrical film market in the world sometime in the next several years” (Brzeski 2018: para. 4); India—which “should be the world’s highest grossing territory in theatrical revenue” with three times the population as North America but is not due to a variety of factors including the low price of tickets, piracy, and high taxes—continues to challenge Hollywood’s dominance with its film industry’s 1500-2000 films per year (Cain 2015: para. 1). It begins by focusing on the paper’s theoretical framework of political economy of film, then explores the xXx franchise, the

film's production practices, use of the star system, and marketing and promotion to unravel a shift in global Hollywood's business operations.

Political Economy of Film

This article utilizes a political economic approach to examine *Return of Xander Cage*. As Mosco (2009: 24) states, political economy of media 'entails a study of social relations, power relations in particular, that mutually constitute the production, consumption, and distribution of resources' (see also Hardy 2014; McChesney 2008). Political economy of film focuses on how the structure and logic of the market drive the practices of the movie industry (Wasko 2003). Fundamentally, the approach tries to understand the production and distribution of film as a commodity that is both 'a tangible product and an intangible service' within a capitalistic system (Pendakur 1990: 39). Hollywood has been exporting films (US\$16.3 billion in exports in 2014 according to the MPAA), persistently attempting to capture the global market (McChesney 2008; Robb 2016). Companies in the industry such as production studios used to be based in one place (mostly Western countries), and their connection with other countries involved only the distribution of its products, a phenomenon that has drastically changed with the information age and global transnational economy. In the NIDCL, studios outsource production tasks traditionally done by workers in the United States to other countries, thereby dismantling the practice of all production happening in one geographical place and decentralizing these same production practices to various locations throughout the world (Miller et al. 2005). Hollywood productions in the NIDCL have become more often runaway productions, in which movies are filmed/produced in locations more cost efficient than traditional Los Angeles (Mirrlees 2013). This also includes international co-productions, in which Hollywood studios partner with international corporations to produce media texts for circulation in more markets, motivated either by financial interests (equity co-productions) or mandated by treaties between host states

(Mirrlees 2013; Author Removed 2012). As such, it has become difficult to ascertain the origin of a media product, as resources are employed from different countries (Mosco 2009).

Nonetheless, a majority of Hollywood movies are still produced by five companies. Out of the top 20 movies of 2017 (worldwide grosses), six were produced by Disney (The Walt Disney Company), five by Warner Brothers (Time Warner), three by 21st Century Fox (formerly 20th Century Fox, a subsidiary of News Corporation), one by Paramount (Viacom) and two by Universal (Comcast) (Box Office Mojo 2017b). These companies dominate transnational film production for several reasons. First, the economic structure of these companies is well integrated both vertically and horizontally, which lets them control production, distribution, promotion and marketing, and exhibition (Croteau and Hoynes 2005; Hardy 2014). Second, due to their size, these conglomerates are able to acquire money from investors more easily in comparison to smaller companies, using strategies such as borrowing money in exchange for partial copyrights or providing stock options for investors (Bettig and Hall 2012). This allows them to reduce risk, as they won't be funding the film production completely. Third, these companies can market and promote their films on a scale unthinkable to smaller companies, as they might own PR firms themselves or promote the film in other media outlets they own in industries such as television, radio, cable, newspapers, websites, and magazines (Bettig and Hall 2012; Hardy 2014). As Gomery (2004) notes, the success of a movie depends upon its distribution, and these companies have the money and resources to distribute and promote films not only to American audiences, but also to global audiences. Power lies with the company that dominates and controls global movie distribution. Lastly, these companies also own the rights for the movies produced, providing them additional sources of revenue and/or an asset that can be used to fund other movie projects (Bettig and Hall 2012; Meehan 2005). Thus, rather than celebrate the success and practices of global Hollywood, political economy of film explores how Hollywood

dominates global markets, the conditions that allow it to do so, how the state assists in its dominance, and what implications it might have on the local film industries of other countries and other socio-political aspects of societies (Wasko 2003).

The big transnational, transindustrial corporations that produce films engage in other activities that allow them to minimize risk and maximize profits, and political economy looks into how these factors influence industry behavior and the content that is produced. One is the production and distribution of sequels in synergistic entertainment franchises. Sequels guarantee a pre-constituted audience by exploiting fan groups who consume the content and purchase additional merchandise (Author removed 2007; Meehan 2005). Sequels of action films in particular often have a global following, and the movies are tailored to engage international audiences by including famous stars, extensive use of special effects and action, and use of simplistic dialogue and story lines. Sequels also allow studios to do tie-ins with other companies such as fast food companies to include movie merchandise and video game companies to release special editions, providing myriad ways to engage the consumer so that he/she remembers and re-enacts the scenarios not only in movie theatres, but also outside of them, ensuring a steady stream of revenue and continued production of sequels, prequels, remakes, digitizations, trilogies, and live-action animations (Jess-Cooke 2009). Recycling, repackaging, revisioning, and recirculating of media products and the use of stars and famous directors ensures profits and minimizes risks due to returning presold audiences (Meehan 2005). The star system provides dominant companies an advantage in marketing and promotion of the movie due to name recognition and the ability to advertise to global audiences (Bettig and Hall 2012).

Political economy of media, therefore, allows us to understand the logic behind Hollywood's production of sequels, use of stars, exploitation of synergies, and planned marketing and promotions, and how these strategies allow it to reap maximum benefits and

maintain global dominance of entertainment by controlling the kind of films being produced, distributed, and exhibited. This article looks at the third movie in the *xXx* franchise and analyzes how the movie employs these techniques to reach not just global audience, but to reach untapped audiences in China and India specifically. Further, it reveals new strategies such as the hiring of a global cast, focused marketing in particular countries (India and China), and foreign investments that are used to capture audiences, minimize risk, and maximize profits. It describes the features of media globalization, in particular, the economic and cultural dimensions of media products and what Hardy (2014) calls ‘internationalization of cultural labor.’ A feature of transnational capitalism and globalization of media production is the utilization of resources (especially labor and physical space) for the production of media products, with an aim to reduce expenses and increase profits at the cost of exploitation of labor, audiences, and environments.

The Franchise

An examination of the *xXx* franchise brings to the forefront the business practices used in production, financing, and distribution to reach targeted markets beyond the North American market and demonstrates why studios chose to finance sequels of synergistic entertainment products. The *xXx* franchise revolves around National Security Agency (NSA) battles with various enemies—both internal and external—fought by hired guns who are ‘extreme personalities.’ The name *xXx* refers to a three-strike policy adopted by NSA that provides an option to criminals to either join the organization or face punishment (Graser 2003). The franchise, created by Rich Wilkes, has had three movies: 2002’s *xXx*, 2005’s *xXx: State of the Union*, and 2017’s *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* (Mendelson 2017a). The first movie introduced the character *xXx* as Xander Cage (Diesel), an extreme sports athlete hired by the NSA to infiltrate and take down a European terrorist group. The movie was directed by Rob Cohen, who had directed *Fast and the Furious*, which also starred Diesel. Revolution

Studios produced the film and Sony's Columbia Pictures distributed it ('Company Credits' 2017). The first sequel did not include Diesel or Cohen; Ice Cube and Lee Tamahori replaced them. Diesel declined to star in the sequel as he had already signed on for the *Pitch Black* sequel and did not want to star in two sequels simultaneously (Graser 2003). Revolution executives planned to have a new actor play xXx in each iteration of the film, which they thought would serve the franchise as a whole but did not explain how (Spector 2003). In the second movie, Ice Cube, an ex-navy seal serving prison time for rogue behavior, is hired by the NSA to stop an internal threat of a coup (Koehler 2005). The film was produced by Revolution Studios, Original Films, and Columbia Tristar, and distributed by Sony Entertainment (Koehler 2005).

The first movie made US\$46 million in the opening weekend of its domestic release, which Tom Sherak, a partner of Revolution Studios, said was a really big release for them, and work on the script for a sequel had already begun (Reuters 2002). A sequel was planned by May 2002, three months before the release of the first movie, with Original Films as a producer, and its Revolution partners noted that the movie would 'have a long and happy future' (Kit 2002: para. 5). Originally, xXx was proposed as an animated movie, but it became a regular movie as it had all the necessary characteristics to produce spin-offs and sequels ('XXX' Threat' 2002). Revolution executives understood the popularity of the genre based on the hype created by *Fast and the Furious* and marketed the movie with Sony, which heavily promoted the movie in its summer releases of *Spider Man* and *Men in Black II* ('XXX' Threat' 2002). The movie made US\$276.8 million worldwide (Honeycutt 2005). The sequel made much less both domestically and globally with reviewers calling the sequel a 'flop' (McNary 2005). The sequel did not match up to its predecessor in any market, with considerable drops in sales in UK, Germany, France, and Spain (McNary 2005).

Columbia Pictures was in discussions with Revolution Studios owner Joe Roth to bring back Diesel in a movie titled, *xXx: Return of Xander Cage*, in 2008 (Fleming 2008). However, the script for the movie was not ready, but it shed light on how studios were hungry to bank on more franchises (Fleming 2008). *Hollywood Reporter* reported that in 2009, Columbia signed Ericsson Core to direct the film, with the intent to fast track its production because it wanted to capitalize on the brand and Diesel's ability to draw box office as demonstrated by the *Fast & Furious* franchise; the plan was to start filming in early 2010 (Kit 2009). But the sequel came about seven years later, with Diesel making a comeback as the title character (Mendelson 2017a).

Production practices

An analysis of the business practices utilized in the production of *Return of Xander Cage* demonstrates how transnational media companies can enter and profit from specific markets (i.e., China and India) and reduce costs and increase revenues by employing distinct production practices in the NIDCL. *Return of Xander Cage* was produced by Revolution Studios along with Roth Kirschenbaum Films and One Race Films, with Paramount Pictures and Columbia Pictures taking up the distribution. Revolution Studios was founded by Roth, former chairman of 20th Century Fox and Walt Disney Studios, as a collaboration with Starz Entertainment, Sony Pictures, and 20th Century Fox in 2000 (Cheney and McNary 2014; Revolution Studios 2014). Between 2001 and 2007, Revolution produced 46 original film productions, including the *xXx* movies in 2002 and 2005 (Revolution Studios 2017a). However, it had not produced a blockbuster and stopped film production in 2007, concentrating on television production instead (Cheney and McNary 2014). The company was acquired by Fortress Investment Group for US\$250 million in 2014, announcing that it would position the company to develop, produce, and distribute television content, 'exploiting' its library of films and television programming (Cheney and McNary 2014).

Between 2014 to 2017, Revolutions Studios acquired Morgan Creek International's film library in 2014, Cold Spring Pictures' library in 2015, and the rights to five of Tango Film's titles, and it bought a stake in Latin Everywhere, a Latino digital entertainment company in 2016, further expanding its library (Revolution Studios 2017a).

As a private equity firm, Fortress Investment was quick to exploit film libraries. The primary motive is not to produce original film and television content but to milk existing copyrights to their maximum limit by repurposing and reusing the same film through releasing dubbed versions in various languages or creating sequels to bank on pre-existing audiences. One way to do so is to concentrate on untapped markets that have a potential to consume, such as the Latino population in the United States and across the Americas through Latin Everywhere. From an economic perspective, the money required to produce new content and the risk of earning profit from it is considerably more than it is to dub movies already produced and owned by the studio. Revolution was acquired by Content Partners, a Los Angeles-based investment firm, in early 2017; the co-founders of Content stated:

Revolution Studios brings with it not only rights to a large catalogue of valuable and durable intellectual properties, but also a wealth of expertise in managing and adding value to film and television assets. (Revolution Studios 2017b: para 3)

Here, the importance of the 'large catalogue of intellectual properties' is stressed again. Revolution might be a studio that produces movies (*Return of Xander Cage* being the most recent after 2007), but its exploitation of its library and capability to repackage and resell seem to be of higher value to it. *xXx*, whose rights are also owned by Revolution, allowed the company to capitalize off the franchise by producing additional sequels and associated content that could attract global audiences. On June 19, five months after the release of *Return of Xander Cage*, Revolution Studios announced that an untitled sequel of

xXx would be produced by Roth with backing from the newly formed film finance and production company The H Collective (Revolution Studios 2017c).

Viacom's Paramount Pictures is also a major global producer and distributor of films; it is owned by National Amusements Incorporated, a company privately owned by the Redstone family (Meehan 2016). It has forged several connections with China in the recent past. In 2016, the studio was looking at selling a 49% stake to the Chinese company Dalian Wanda Group, a deal that was rejected by Viacom's board (Maddaus and Frater 2017). However, two Chinese companies—Huahua Media and Shanghai Film group—invested an undisclosed amount in *Return of Xander Cage* through Paramount and Revolution, a deal that also makes them the marketing partners for China (McNary 2017). The distribution of *Return of Xander Cage* was under China Film Group and Huaxia Distributions, both firms owned by the Chinese state (Frater 2017). Paramount previously worked with Huahua for *Star Trek Beyond*, and the Chinese company was the marketing partner for the 2014 film, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (McNary 2017). It is interesting to note that these films are both sequels, with *Star Trek* earning US\$66 million in four months in China, and *Transformers* raking in over US\$300 million in the Chinese box office, the first foreign film to achieve the US\$300 million mark (McNary 2017). The Chinese company not only invested in another sequel with *xXx*, but as noted previously, both Huahua and Shanghai Film group planned to invest US\$1 billion in Paramount itself, with an agreement to invest in all of Paramount's movies for the next three years (Maddaus and Frater 2017). Paramount Pictures' President of Worldwide Distribution and Marketing Megan Colligan commented on the deal, stating:

We are pleased to collaborate once again with Huahua Media and the Shanghai Film Group. *XXX: Return of Xander Cage* is a film that delivers incredible action and great entertainment and we anticipate a strong showing for the film in China, where our

stars Vin Diesel, Donnie Yen, Kris Wu and Nina Dobrev have such dedicated fan bases. (Tartaglione 2017: para. 7)

This quote demonstrates two important aspects of Hollywood: its concentration on China and the constant effort to capitalize on dedicated fan bases. The importance of China to Hollywood is well known (Barnes 2017; Cranswick 2017; Kokas 2017), especially the ability of Chinese audiences to transform lackluster domestic performances to profitable hits (e.g., *Terminator Genesis*, *The Expendables*, *Godzilla*, *Pacific Rim* and more recently *Return of Xander Cage*) (Cranswick 2017). Notably, the genre of each of these films is action/adventure, a genre that transcends cultural boundaries, especially with the presence of special effects and high-tech graphics (Bettig and Hall 2012; Whipp 2011). With the relaxing of rules on the import of Western films in China, Hollywood studios now have more than a billion potential customers they can tap into, especially when the American market is in stagnation (Barnes 2017). The current policy in China allows for the import of 34 foreign films; however, China's co-production policy allows imported films that have significant Chinese investments and employ Chinese talent be considered a local film only for the purpose of distribution (Kokas 2017). As noted earlier, a day before the movie released in North America, SFG and Huahua invested in Paramount and consequently in *Return of Xander Cage*. The Chinese co-production policy allows for approvals of foreign films being distributed as local films in the pre-production stage itself (Kokas 2017). However, in this case, the co-production investment from China came just a few days before the release, but Paramount had already employed Yen and Wu, two of the biggest Chinese talents. There is not sufficient data to determine whether *Return of Xander Cage* was able to capitalize on the co-production policy in China, but the casting decisions and marketing made up for it. It is important to note that in the new transnational global economy and NIDCL, it is not just Hollywood studios exporting movies, but Hollywood movies funded by and talent sourced

from China and other developing countries (e.g., Huahua and SFG in this case, and Reliance Entertainment from India investing in DreamWorks) (Bart and Frater 2014).

Return of Xander Cage is also a clear example of an economic runaway production (Mirrlees 2013), as it was largely filmed in Toronto, with a few scenes shot at a studio in the Dominican Republic (McNary 2016). The film encompasses all the characteristics of a runaway production, with film production ‘offshored’ to Toronto, for the city was not featured in the film at all. As such, the decision to shoot in the above mentioned places was not motivated by artistic needs, but purely for economic purposes. It also reveals that the movie was intended to be a vehicle of profit to be extracted from specific geographical regions. Offshoring of production would reduce financial risk and increase the chances of profit.

Superstar Union

Another way the film was sold to international audiences is through the carefully selected stars of the film. The popularity of the movie *Furious 7* made evident that Diesel is one of the most bankable Hollywood actors in China (Brzeski 2017). *Furious 7* earned US\$390 in China in 2015 and was one of the biggest Hollywood films to open in China; both *xXx* and *Fate of the Furious* followed the same path, making Diesel ‘box-office gold’ in China (Libbey 2017). Pressberg (2017) calls Diesel a ‘megastar’ who has a massive following and is immensely popular with China’s netizens. As part of the promotion in China, a music video made for Wu’s single included Diesel, which was, as Nic Crawley, President of International Marketing and Distribution, noted, a calculated decision (Pressberg 2017). Diesel has an established following, especially due to the *Fast and Furious* franchise, and his support was solidified with the third *xXx* movie (Vary 2017). In a 2015 interview, Diesel referred to himself as ‘a multicultural megastar,’ and Robehmed (2015: paras. 1, 3) called him ‘an action star who's visually relatable to many international audiences at once.’

Diesel's *Fast and Furious* franchise was also popular in India with the latest movie grossing US\$7.3 million during the first weekend (Jha 2017b). Hollywood's 'mixploitation' by casting a 'mixed-race' star like Diesel is discussed in detail by Mirrlees (2014: 32), who explains how Diesel is a 'globally popular design element;' his casting is an essential part of pre-selling the movie due to the ability of stars like Diesel to attract audiences globally with his 'universalistic persona.'

Yen started his career in the Hong Kong film industry but soon became a sensation in the Chinese movie industry, with movies such as *Ip Man* (and subsequent *Ip Man 2* and *Ip Man 3*) and *Drunken Tai Chi* (Pressberg 2016). Yen also has had roles in Hollywood movies such as *Shanghai Knights* and *Star Wars: Rogue One*. He has a strong fan following in China, and the sales of *Rogue One* have proved the fans' loyalty (Pressberg 2016; Rottenberg 2016). *China Film Insider* considers Yen China's biggest action star (Schwankert 2017). As Pressberg (2016: para. 16) noted regarding the success of *Rogue One*, while Yen 'remains one of the biggest stars in Asian film, [he] is leaving the door open for more Hollywood projects.' He continued: 'At a time when the Chinese audience has never been more important to big studios, his biography, charisma and proven fan base has Yen sitting pretty.'

Wu was considered to be China's next big star who acts, sings, and is a fashion icon (Payne 2017). Wu's popularity exploded after he modelled with Kendal Jenner for the cover of *Vogue China* in 2015, making him the fourth most tweeted celebrity during the MET gala, and boasting an equally strong 40 million followers on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform (Payne 2017). Commenting on the music video of his single, 'Juice,' that he did as part of the promotion for *Return of Xander Cage*, Wu said:

This is my first real global release, and I wanted to come out of the gates showing everyone who I am [...] Vin and I have developed a real supportive friendship, and for the dude that has over 100 million fans on Facebook to pull up and flex in my video

really means a lot. It was all genuine and I think that vibe was definitely captured in the video. (Benjamin 2017: para. 4)

Demonstrating the objective of the film and the exploitation of a multinational star system, Benjamin (2017: para. 1) reported, ‘The *xXx* franchise has already made millions worldwide, but the film series gets a little more global today with the reveal of its latest soundtrack single.’

Within a decade in Bollywood, Padukone has made it to the list of world’s highest paid actresses list (Robehmed 2016). She has acted in numerous Bollywood films that have crossed the US\$15 million mark, which is a common measure of box office success in Bollywood (Robehmed 2016). The actress has around 19 million followers on Instagram and Twitter, and around 34 million followers on Facebook. Her popularity across Asia and now the globe is reflective in her social media followers, making her the most followed woman on Twitter in Asia (‘This Bollywood’ 2017). NPR called Padukone India’s biggest movie star and the queen of Bollywood (Qureshi 2017). She has her own clothing label and more than a dozen endorsements for multiple Indian brands (Robehmed 2016).

It is apparent that the stars of the movie have been successful in their domestic film industries and have acquired a significant following. It is also evident that this following helped increase *xXx*’s audiences as the pre-constituted local audiences who are followers of the local film stars also become audiences for the Hollywood movie. Excerpts from interviews with the stars provide us with the logic behind the casting and corroborates the business or market angle to the casting. In an interview, Yen expressed his concern about the market approach of this kind of casting, stating:

We make a film for massive audiences. China has the biggest population. It makes sense in a business point of view. Right now, of course you will see more Chinese

actors. I would like to see Chinese actors cast and considered for their talents not marketing purposes. (Chew 2017: para 6)

Yen's concern reflects a larger trend in which Hollywood is willing to diversify its cast as long as it makes profits, pointing to the practice of hiring international stars not because of talent but to exploit a pre-constituted fan base. Pressberg (2017: paras. 13, 14) quotes an interview with Crawley who talks about tapping into the local devoted fan bases of Yen, Wu, and xXx cast member Nina Dobrev, a Bulgarian-Canadian actress known for her roles in television series such as *Degrassi* and *The Vampire Diaries*, commenting:

Diesel and the film's female stars, including Dobrev, who has a significant following in China, should mitigate [failing at Chinese box office] [...] "Where China has an emotional connection to 'Transformers,' it doesn't seem they have quite a connection to the 'Star Wars' franchise [...] Our movie--because of Vin, because of Kris, because of our actresses — we find ways to connect with different audiences."

The cast and the crew also described this international cast as an effect of the general globalization that is taking place around the world. Describing the selection of the cast as an effect of globalization shifts the focus from the actual motivation behind such selection (e.g., target markets, making the movie more globally acceptable, profits). When viewed as an effect of globalization, it veils the logic of profit and appears to be a phenomenon that is natural in a world where capital and resources appear to move freely (Harvey, 2005).

Director D J Caruso stated:

I would say it was more of a study of not just the [*Fast and Furious*] franchise, but if you even look at what happens with the Marvel movies, and just the globalization of cinema, and how cinema travels around the world. It was more a conscious effort still to be original in the type of actors and characters and people from all over the world that we brought in this cast, but it was more stepping back and studying the current

movie atmosphere and globalization of cinema and what is translating and working worldwide. (Mendelson 2017c: para. 22)

The logic of the use of stars is similar to Bettig and Hall's (2012) description of how dominant studios in Hollywood have the 'deep pockets' to pay the stars and as such are able to create movies with popular actors and directors, in turn collecting large profits, while smaller studios are unable to compete on this scale. Revolution takes this to a global level, where the cast includes top stars in their respective markets, and the studio is able to hire them to connect to foreign audiences, especially Chinese and Indian audiences in this case, ensuring the established fan base of Yen and Padukone become consumers of *xXx*. Caruso's point of 'what is translating and working worldwide' reveals a very particular element of global blockbusters: the logic is films that have an international cast of stars from nations where studios want the movie to perform well will ensure audiences. From the point of view of the actors performing the labor of acting, Revolution is creating value in the commodity of *xXx* movie through the labor of the actors, and simultaneously exploiting the cultural capital (e.g., fan base, popularity) built by those actors in their domestic markets to create surplus value for the studio, by ensuring pre-constituted consumers for the movie. Bettig and Hall (2012) mention star power along with simplistic dialogue and special effects as methods of tailoring a movie to global audiences. However, what used to be star power from Hollywood now contains star power from every market that needs to be 'conquered.'

Joe Krischenbaum, one of the producers of the film, expressed similar thoughts about globalization and the global cast and said that Diesel wanted the *xXx* franchisee to go global and 'escape the microcosm of a US franchise,' and to do so hired Yen, Wu, Tony Jaa (a martial artist from Thailand famous for his *Ong Bak* trilogy), Padukone, and Australia's Ruby Rose to make the movie more international (HeyUGuys 2017). If the motive behind the casting was to reflect the globalization of cinema, any actor of Chinese or Indian origin could

have been cast. But, from a business perspective following the logic of the market and profits, that would pose a risk of possible failure, and casting already famous actors with a large fan base in the world's most populated regions not only averts the risk, but also ensures profits. Beltrán (2005) analyzed Hollywood action movies of the early 2000s and concluded that the changing ethnic demographics of United States was reflected in the casting of multi-racial protagonists in action movies, a trend that has been consistently carried on by the *Fast and Furious* franchise. A similar argument is also made by Mirrlees (2014) while discussing the casting of Diesel as mixploitation—the use of race to sell films in multiple markets. With *Return of Xander Cage*, Revolution has taken this to the global level, tailoring a film to rope in profits from specific emerging markets such as India and China by using the local stars in the Hollywood commodity, a calculated and targeted mixploitation. The following quote by Tomas Jegeus, co-president of 20th Century Fox International Theatrical, provides the logic that lies behind Hollywood film production:

If we have storylines that at script-stage feel too U.S.-centric, especially with big action or science-fiction movies, we try to come up with solutions that will make the movie feel more global. (Whipp 2011: para. 4)

Marketing and Promotion

Another way Paramount made sure the film would be successful in China and India was by deploying an extensive local marketing and promotion strategies aimed at young movie audiences in the two countries. As with other big Hollywood films, *Return of Xander Cage* had a strong marketing campaign to create buzz for the movie; however, in this case, the marketing campaigns targeted China and India. In China, the use of digital/online marketing was seen as the key to reach potential audiences who according to research surveys spend a majority of their time online, and as noted, the team accordingly released a music video featuring scenes from the movie and music by Wu that received more than 40

million views online (Faughnder 2017). The movie stars also took part in live video conferences with fans on social media sites and took selfies with fans on Weibo (Faughnder 2017). All of the cast members also appeared in a YouTube video to wish China a happy New Year, with Yen and Wu teaching the cast how to convey the holiday wishes in the Chinese language (Go Official 2017a). Along with this, Paramount made use of Huahua's marketing strategies that were tried and tested during the promotion of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, such as television tie-ins, banner performances, and a focus on marketing in smaller cities, not just Shanghai and Beijing (Pressberg 2017)

Chinese online marketing is very effective, as the extensive use of online platforms by urban youth provides marketing professionals valuable data that is then used to create specific marketing content that can be targeted and tailored according to the user (Faughnder 2017). The concentration on online marketing makes Chinese promotion costs efficient for studios and can be handled in a budget ranging from US\$6 million to US\$15 million for a big film, while studios might spend more than US\$30 million on television advertising alone in the United States (Faughnder 2017). Paramount also made sure that the movie produced enough hype to create word-of-mouth promotions and developed the movie's Weibo account in November 2015, 15 months prior to the actual release, posting more than ten updates every day for most of 2016 (Pressberg 2017). With the restrictions on foreign films in China, the studios had little time for marketing as the release date for the movie was announced only four weeks prior, making the marketing in that month crucial, as that could determine whether a movie would make it big or not, taking into consideration the release of other Chinese and foreign movies at the same time (Faughnder 2017). However, *xXx* was lucky to receive a release date right after the annual New Year blackout, during which only Chinese movies are screened, and a time when audiences are awaiting foreign movies (Pressberg 2017). Paramount capitalized on the holiday season by ensuring visibility for the movie at

train stations and airports, as thousands of Chinese people travel within the country during the Chinese New Year, and the movie trailer played along with local Chinese movies during the season (Pressberg 2017). According to Paramount's Colligan, the success of *xXx* in China was due to the online marketing initiatives and the presence of Yen and the rest of the international cast (Faughnder 2017). She stated:

The audience is young and highly mobile [...] There's very open social engagement between the stars and the fans. That's how audiences in China want to engage with these properties. (Faughnder 2017: para. 19)

Although the whole cast did go to promote the movie in China, the 30-day promotion was mainly focused on Yen to attract the fan base of the local superstar (Busch 2017). Crawley, when asked about predicting the movie's performance in China, said that the movie had 'China written all over it' (Pressberg 2017: para. 4). Additionally, the film's director along with Diesel, Padukone, Dorbev, and Chinese stars Yen and Wu attended the Beijing premier of the movie (Xinhua 2017).

Viacom18 Motion Pictures, a subsidiary of the joint venture between Viacom and Network 18, took up the distribution and marketing of *xXx* in India ('Viacom18 Motion' 2017). With the casting of Bollywood star Padukone, India was considered a priority market (Yadav 2017). Viacom 18 Motion Pictures focused on larger urban centers for promotions that included Diesel in attendance (Yadav 2017). Caruso, Diesel, and Padukone attended a grand premier in Mumbai that included BMX stunt riders, skateboarders, B-Boying troupes, and an electronic music concert, all before the red carpet premier ('Viacom18 Motion' 2017). The movie was released in India one week prior to the global release. The Chief Operation Officer of Viacom18 Motion Pictures commented on the movie, stating:

Moving beyond conventional cinema, we are constantly persevering to bring only the best of Hollywood to India with our partnership with Paramount. India has emerged

as one of the priority markets globally and VMP is proud to have been a pioneer in bringing about this change; the release of *xXx* in India before its worldwide release is one such step in this direction. We hope Indian audiences enjoy watching the film before the world does. ('Viacom18 Motion' 2017: para. 4)

In October 2016, Viacom18 Motion Pictures partnered with PVR, a film entertainment company that owns over 500 screens in India (PVR Cinema 2017), to organize the premier and to introduce a new marketing strategy called 'theatre takeover,' in which select theatres were completely rebranded for *xXx*, from seats to restrooms, photo opportunities, and gaming zones (Yadav 2017). YouTube and Facebook also partnered with Viacom 18, and events on the day of the premier were live on both platforms (Yadav 2017). The marketing in India included ground promotion that started in October 2016 and continued until the end of January 2017, along with extensive use of social media to promote the film (Yadav 2017). The marketing focused on localizing the film to Indian audiences and promoting the film in non-urban centers. The trailer specifically made for Padukone, similar to the one made for Yen and Wu, was released on the pilot episode of *Bigg Boss 10* (the Indian version of *Big Brother*), that according to Rudrarup Datta, Head of Marketing for Viacom18 Motion Pictures, provided a lot of visibility and mileage for the movie promotion (Yadav 2017). The very use of *Bigg Boss* as a platform to promote a movie starring Padukone provides an insight into the audiences that the promotion is supposed to reach. *Bigg Boss* claims to have the largest viewership in India, and reality television in general has become popular, especially with young audiences (Timmons 2011). Similar to the Chinese New Year wishes, a video of Diesel wishing Indians well on the occasion of the Diwali festival was also released to extend the movie's localization (Go Official 2017b). Viacom18 also held online contests to localize the movie to daily Indian activities, such as a 'How do you look cool while eating vadapav?' contest (Yadav 2017). The grand welcome for Diesel and Padukone

organized at the Mumbai airport had women draped in sarees riding motorcycles as an escort to Diesel's motorcade as part of the localization process (Yadav 2017). The promotion budget was estimated between US\$1.6 million to US\$2 million (Yadav 2017). The premier in Mumbai itself was a spectacle, attended by more than 2000 invitees including Bollywood superstars such as Ranveer Singh, Shahid Kapoor, Kalki Koechlin, and Karan Johar, and was reported widely in mainstream media ('Vin Diesel's India' 2017).

These marketing initiatives show that the producers of the movie clearly wanted the movie to do well in the Chinese and Indian markets and marketed the film accordingly, with specific initiatives such as an early release in India, localization of content through dedicated trailers for Yen and Wu and Padukone, efforts to rope in possible consumers through social media, planned marketing aimed at specific audiences (e.g., the holiday crowd and Yen/Wu fans in China; Padukone fans and urban youth in India). Unlike *Avatar*, which had a global marketing budget of at least US\$150 million, producers of *xXx* had more focused and localized marketing in the markets they wanted to reap the most. The logic behind the film with its global cast, localized marketing, and promotion specifically in countries of India and China is for the producers to capture the untapped market of these two countries. As Bettig and Hall (2012) noted, the franchise phenomenon forces creators to perceive movies as vehicles of profit, not as a creative art form. This is demonstrated in the production of *xXx*, for the producers knew that the American market was saturated, but profit could be earned by tailoring the film product to where they expected the most box office returns: India and China.

Conclusion

The movie *Return of Xander Cage* marks an important point in global Hollywood. This movie on its surface seems to be a celebration of globalization and cultural blending, a portrayal of the vibrant US society aimed at everyone around the globe. But when one peels

the layers off the commodity that is *Return of Xander Cage*, it reveals the logic of market influencing the movie from its very nascent stages. Even after the dismal performance of the second *xXx* movie in 2005, the plans for a third one materialized in 2008. Apart from reconfirming the logic of the market present in the creation of sequels, this movie reveals the working of global capitalism and how the movie industry is adapting to it. First, the dominant studios are still dominating, as only they have the capital to hire the biggest stars, not only in America, but also across the globe, along with control of the rights of the movie. Second, *Return of Xander Cage* illustrates a new form of global blockbuster that can be conceptualized as a ‘targeted global blockbuster.’ The film exhibits most characteristics of a global blockbuster, such as extensive marketing, international stars, global audiences, and enormous global ticket sales (Mirrlees 2013). However, it is a production assembled to capture audiences in two very specific geographical locations: China and India. These targets are captured through casting of above-the-line workers from these two regions (e.g., superstars Padukone, Yen, and Wu) and targeted and tailored marketing campaigns in these two regions. The large revenues gathered in these two regions also reflect the decisions made during production. A textual analysis of *Return of Xander Cage* might provide a clearer picture of the specific design elements that target the intended geographical audiences within the globally popular design described by Mirrlees (2014).

Further, *xXx* reveals the exploitation of the actors’ labor. The calculated casting of very specific actors from particular markets creates value for the movie, and their pre-constituted fan base and popularity create the surplus value needed by the studio. In the process, the international actors (along with Diesel) are commodified as cultural hooks to reel in the desired audiences. The logic of targeting desired markets is seen in the focus and meticulous planning of marketing and promotional activities that were localized and successfully executed in the desired markets. This movie also reveals the flow of labor,

capital, and resources that facilitate the creation of a Hollywood movie. For this particular movie, capital came from both United States and China, while talent (labor in the form of actors and other crew members) came from across the world. Attracting international investments helps Hollywood mitigate risk and helps global companies become a player in the Hollywood-dominated film industry. The film's production practices are corporate responses aimed to break into untapped markets and extract profit from these regions. Though globalization is not new, what is new is how Hollywood is responding to potential challenges to its economic and cultural dominance from competitors' markets, specifically China and India, whose markets are large and their domestic film industries are growing. This also provides a novel way to examine the role, importance, and influences of 'Chindia' in research and understanding of global media (Thussu, 2013).

Finally, this paper questions the definition of a 'Hollywood' movie in today's transnational global capitalist system and a NIDCL. This Hollywood commodity of *Return of Xander Cage* was viewed and promoted as a Hollywood movie. However, this movie had capital investments from China, was entirely shot in Toronto and the Dominican Republic, and included carefully chosen cast members from China, India, Thailand, and Australia. The movie was intended for global audiences—particularly China and India—rather than the domestic audience. But yet it reaped profits globally as a *Hollywood* movie. If one considers the definition of a Hollywood movie as a movie made by the US film industry intended for US audiences, it would not capture *xXx* as a Hollywood movie.

It is precisely through these mechanisms, made possible by the power of the big studios due to their deep pockets, global reach, vertical and horizontal integration, and exploitation of market logic, that they are able to use the resources, labor, and cultural capital of various people and populations and profit from them while legitimizing and reinforcing the superiority of Hollywood cinema. To counter the effects of Hollywood's dominance,

countries should continue to and if necessary increase protections for their domestic industries and close the loopholes that allow Hollywood to mask its films as domestic films rather than Hollywood fare. Further, countries like China and India, along with providing such protections, should also implement policies aimed at encouraging movie production that reflects the diversity present in these countries. In sum, Xander Cage may or may not save the world, but he has surely helped to save and ensure the flow of profits to global Hollywood.

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