



‘Lighting up screens around the world’¹: Sony and the development of the local language production²

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Abstract

This paper is a historical, institutional, and industrial discourse analysis of Sony and the development of their LLP strategy using trade publications, box office data, and interviews. On the one hand, I am interested in examining the cultural and geographical language utilized to promote or defend these practices. How do Sony executives articulate this strategic shift towards localization in their international film operations? On the other hand, how do LLP’s operate on a local or national cinema level? Taking one of Sony’s biggest markets Brazil as my example, I will consider Sony do Brasil as major co-producer and distributor within the *pós-retomada* film industry. Sony’s LLPs function as a significant part of the contemporary Brazilian cinema and are routinely many of the most popular theatrical releases. Overall, my research is an effort in expanding conversations about the complex nature of transnational filmmaking practices from multiple institutional, cultural, and geographical perspectives.

Keywords: discourse analysis; Sony; Brazil; globalization and homogenization

Sony Pictures Entertainment (SPE), the film, television and game production and distribution arm of the Sony Corporation, began expanding their overseas film divisions around the mid to late-1990s. SPE co-president Jeff Sagansky stated at a Los Angeles Entertainment Symposium in 1997: “my belief is that the day of ‘if we film it, they will come’ are either over or soon will be. The world is changing, and we have to change with it (or we) will pay a terrible price.” Sagansky criticized the traditional Hollywood-centric, one-size-fits-all approach to overseas film territories and instead distinguished Sony’s future strategies: “Today, I see two new boats pulling out, one for Asia and one for Latin America . . . any company that aspires to market leadership on a

¹ Sony 1998 Annual Report: 30.

² Paper presented at the IV Brazil-US Colloquium on Communication Studies.

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global basis – and I work for one, Sony – better be on those boats.”⁴ Particularly, SPE began extending operations beyond its primary focus on distributing English-language film productions and acquiring and creating regional television networks as another window for their content library. Instead of treating international markets such as Latin America, Europe, and Asia as an extension of a geographic category known as the domestic, North American market by distributing the same content globally as has been the strategy historically, Sony began actively to produce and distribute specifically for regional and local audiences through the local language production strategy (LLP). For this paper, I will examine how Sony fashions and discusses this “boat” sailing towards a new type of international operations through the LLP. The result is an aggressive localization strategy that has emerged over the last decade and has become associated primarily with Sony and the contemporary transnational media conglomerate.

According to Charles Acland:

the globalization of film must not be mistaken as another case of unidirectional flow of cultural commodities and ideologies from the United States to the rest of the world . . . even at the level of participation in an economic machine, we do not find a single nationally bound organizational or ownership structure but rather an intricate international concentration.⁵

I am interested in interrogating the transnational flow of film products and partnerships in contemporary media industries as suggested by Acland that do not reflect traditional geographic boundaries associated with national cinema. This paper is part of my work in progress dissertation project. While my subsequent research focuses on levels of agency, partnership and decision-making within LLPs in the Brazilian film industry, my objective for this paper is to outline the LLP strategy, Sony’s position as a pioneer, and how the Brazilian market factors into this industrial history. In order to negotiate the

⁴ Carl DiOrio. “Sagansky: Go with the global.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 10 February 1997.

⁵ Charles Acland. *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003: 132.



complex global partnerships and strategies that exist across various film industries, my research undertakes a historical, institutional, and industrial discourse analysis on Sony and the general development of their LLP strategy using trade publications, box office data, and interviews. Since little has been written about this strategy in academic literature, my aim is to examine the cultural and geographical language utilized to promote or brand these practices. How do Sony executives articulate this strategic shift towards localization in their international film operations? I will also discuss briefly how LLPs operate on a local level through examples such as Sony do Brasil's major position as a LLP co-producer and distributor within the contemporary Brazilian industry. Sony's LLPs function as a significant part of the contemporary Brazilian cinema and are routinely among the most popular theatrical releases. Overall, my research is an effort in expanding conversations about the complex nature of transnational filmmaking practices from multiple institutional, cultural, and geographical perspectives.

Enter the LLP

Beginning around 1998, SPE's international film divisions made a strategic shift towards local co-productions in smaller markets outside of the United States.⁶ One of the most important strategies to emerge was the local language production, or LLP. Described as a "bottom-up approach" to filmmaking (to distinguish it from Sony's globally distributed English-language top-down approach), the LLP strategy is a film produced within a local industry such as Brazil, Germany, or India using local talent and creative professionals but financially backed, guided, and, in some cases, solely

⁶ Laura M. Holson. "Hollywood seeks action overseas." *New York Times*. 3 April 2006.



developed by the transnational corporation.⁷ The films are aimed at local, regional, or geo-linguistic audiences and typically not planned for exportation to other markets. Instead they are designed for limited to wide release in their national or regional industry within the global marketplace or what Sony executives call “east of Columbus Avenue and west of Pacific Coast Highway.”⁸ Although international co-productions are not a new strategy, media companies like Sony, Fox, and Warner Bros. appear to be (re)thinking their local position in translocal ways.⁹ The LLP reflects a “policy of ‘global-localization’” as described by Sony international executives. From their perspective, SPE film divisions such as Columbia TriStar team up with a local Sony office and other local production companies for local distribution as a way to “supplement” their English-language Hollywood films already in British, Hong Kong, or Mexican theaters.¹⁰ Sony’s LLP’s range anywhere from the Brazilian *Orfeu* (dir. Carlos Diegues, 1999), the Chinese language, *Kung Fu Hustle* (dir. Stephen Chow, 1998), or more recently the United Kingdom’s *Damned United* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2009).¹¹

General discussions in the industry regard the LLP as innovative, and one of the central discursive threads revolves around Sony’s position as a “vanguard” in

⁷ Eric Pflanner. “Hollywood turning to non-English fare” *International Herald Tribune*. 24 May 2004; Nakamura, Akemi. “Hollywood’s Japan units pursue local blockbusters.” *The Japan Times*. 12 December 2002.

⁸ DiOrio.

⁹ I use the term translocal to convey “the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive*” elements of each space as suggested by Aihwa Ong. I want to emphasize the slippery “inbetweenness” of the “trans” in relation to not only the (trans)national, but also the local as utilized by Shanti Kumar, Michael Curtin, and Andreas Hepp. Michael Curtin. “Thinking Globally: From Media Imperialism to Media Capital” in *Media Industries: History, Theory and Method*. eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009; Andreas Hepp. “Transculturality as a Perspective: Researching Media Cultures Comparatively” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*. 10:1 (January 2009); Shanti Kumar. *Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006; Aihwa Ong. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logic of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke Up, 1999.

¹⁰ Meenakshi Shedde. “Hollywood Threatens Bollyland” *The Times of India*. 5 November 1998.

¹¹ Holson.



pioneering this strategy.¹² Sony is credited with becoming “the first global company to go into foreign-language film production” and “leading the way in producing motion pictures not just overseas, but in languages other than English with cultural content geared for particular countries or territories” with its Columbia TriStar operations in Germany, Brazil, Hong Kong, and United Kingdom.¹³ Furthermore, Sony’s LLP operations are described as “the most ambitious worldwide” due to its position as the only major transnational film company to maintain stand-alone local language productions units throughout Europe, Latin America, and Asia.¹⁴ The film largely credited with Sony’s solidifying the LLP strategy is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (1999, dir. Ang Lee). A transnational Chinese language film co-produced by Sony’s Asian operation and released by Sony Pictures Classics, *Crouching Tiger* grossed over \$209 million worldwide and became known as the “brass ring” for LLPs due to its successful widespread release out of its cultural linguistic region. The film is credited with igniting widespread “ambitions in the world of local-language production – the biz’s term for studio co-productions in a specific country or region.”¹⁵

Sony personnel construct this LLP origination story from a traditional corporate top-down perspective. According to SPE interviews and accounts in various American and transnational English-language periodicals and trades, the story of the LLP strategy originated from the efforts of a few key executives, namely John Calley and Gareth Wigan. Former President of Warner Bros., Calley, joined SPE in 1996 as president and Chief Operating Officer (COO). In 1998, he became CEO. Wigan began his career as a MCA agent in the late 1950s and was an independent producer until joining Columbia Pictures in 1987 as a production consultant. In 1997, he became the co-vice chairman

¹² Swart.

¹³ Rose; Leigh; Pflanner.

¹⁴ LaPorte; “Sony Pictures Creates International Motion Picture Group”; Hollinger.

¹⁵ LaPorte.



of the Columbia TriStar Motion Picture Group and head of the consolidated international group ten years later.¹⁶ SPE CEO Michael Lynton credits Wigan for “almost single-handedly” building Sony’s international film business and “making him a real pioneer in our industry. He recognized early on the power of the global market.”¹⁷

According to Wigan, Calley also held a central role in developing overseas production companies upon his promotion to CEO of SPE.¹⁸ Yet, numerous accounts locate Wigan as solely responsible for the growth of Sony’s local language business.¹⁹ Sony executives such as Wigan described the company’s involvement in local film productions originating from place of cultural investment, respect, and partnerships. As the executive force behind the LLP strategy roughly from 1998 to 2008, he fashioned his role more as a collaborator with local filmmakers.²⁰ Wigan described his position in coordinating LLPs as “what I do in talking with filmmakers is I work on the basis that I’m there to learn . . . I’m there largely to ask questions.”²¹

Historically English-language films increasingly have dominated box offices in Europe and Latin American territories.²² Thus, the LLP strategy exemplifies a shift from Sony’s primary strategy focusing on big-budget tentpole pictures such as *2012* (2009, dir. Roland Emmerich) or its upcoming *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010, dir. Ryan Murphy) produced Sony Pictures and intended for wide release in a global market.²³ Sony conceives the LLP strategy as an opportunity to diversify their position in these markets

¹⁶ John Calley biography, Turner Classic Movies (tcm.com), accessed 1 June 2010; Gareth Wigan obituary. DeadlineHollywoodDaily.com, accessed 1 March 2010.

¹⁷ Justin Kroll. “Gareth Wigan; CineAsia visionary of the year.” *Variety*. 5 December 2008.

¹⁸ Leigh.

¹⁹ Due to Gareth Wigan’s passing in February 2010, I was unable to interview him for this project. However, I have been able to gather various trade interviews on his role in LLPs.

²⁰ Holson; “Sony Pictures Creates International Motion Picture Group.”

²¹ Holson.

²² Toby Miller, et al. *Global Hollywood 2*. London: BFI, 2005.

²³ Pflanner; Alan Leigh. “Think Locally.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 1 October 1999.



through “a growing appetite” for local language films.²⁴ As one Fox International executive suggested, “The template for popular culture comes from Hollywood, but the interest is becoming more local. Either you say, ‘We are going to protect what we know,’ or you realize that the world is changing without you.”²⁵

Significantly, SPE’s executives claim not to follow a strict recipe or template for each LLP production no matter where it is produced. Sony becomes involved with local productions through acquisitions for distribution rights, development, and co-productions. According to the current President of International Motion Picture Production Group, Deborah Schindler, “Sometimes we team up with local producers. Sometimes we do it on our own.”²⁶ Sony’s local marketing and acquisition divisions help with identifying material that may work culturally and economically for a particular market.²⁷ However, many times local filmmakers or partners develop the idea for a LLP before approaching Sony.

A local language operation begins with Sony establishing a production office in a city or national location such as Hong Kong or São Paulo, Brazil, where most likely SPE already has a distribution operation or television interest such as Sony Entertainment Television in Latin America or AXN in Asia or Spain. While Sony appears to choose national or regional markets where it has some familiarity or previous operations, it tends to establish LLP operations first in large national markets within each geographical or geo-linguistic region. Most accounts locate Germany as the first location for an official Sony LLP operation beginning in 1998. Deutsche Columbia TriStar made a deal with Brandenburg state government in Germany to co-produce film,

²⁴ Leigh.

²⁵ Holson.

²⁶ Sharon Swart. “Sony spans globe for more local films; Deborah Schindler ramps up in Berlin” *Variety*, 13 June 2008.

²⁷ *ibid.*



television, and other media projects. Sony planned to make two to three local language pictures a year ranging from \$2.5 to \$4.5 million each in an effort to “work with the [German] industry to double the turnover of German films to make them not just successful in Germany, but also to expand the market to cross borders in production and distribution.”²⁸

Origination stories and industry accounts tend to contradict Sony’s history of co-production partnerships. Many of the industry trade journals examined within my research credit Germany as Sony’s first official LLP operation, it was not the first place Sony implemented strategic co-production and distributing partnerships. As Latin America, particularly Brazil, was the first region for Sony’s entrance in satellite television partnerships in the early 1990s with HBO Brasil and Sony Entertainment Television, it also served as one of the first markets for implementing the LLP strategy.²⁹ Sony actively began co-producing local films in Brazil as early as 1996. Sony do Brasil was involved with productions of *Tieta do Agreste* (1996, dir. Carlos Diegues), *O Que é Isso, Companheiro?* (1996, dir. Bruno Barreto) and *A Guerra de Canudos* (1997, dir. Sergio Rezende). Sony was also the first transnational media conglomerate investing systematically during the *retomada*, the new wave or rebirth of Brazilian cinema in the mid-1990s.³⁰

Mapping a chronological timeline for the LLP strategy is a challenging and untidy task. Instead of a linear journey across the globe, Sony’s movement into LLP operations appears disjunctive occurring almost simultaneously in various parts of the

²⁸ Eric Hansen and Cathy Dunkley. “SPE makes mark in Germany.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 13 February 1998.

²⁹ Scott Hettrick. “HBO in Brazil with Ole spinoff of 24-hr premium cable TV network to launch July 1, 1994” *Hollywood Reporter* 20 April 1994; Janet Stilson. “Americans plans rival film channels in Brazil.” *Multichannel News*. 25 April 1994, 15:7; Robert Marich. “WB, Sony plan Latin cablers Announces plan to launch cable networks in Latin America.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 25 January 1995.

³⁰ Filmes Co-Produzidos e distribuídos pelas companhias associadas á MPA. MPAA website. <http://www.mpaal.org.br/br/filmes.htm>. Accessed 15 January 2010.



globe or across areas Sony defined as “key markets.” For example, Sony began co-producing films from its operation in Brazil by the mid-1990s, a few years earlier than the reported “first” local production operations in Germany. The same year, Sony established Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia located in Hong Kong where Sony already had a strong television infrastructure.³¹ According to former SPE chairman John Calley, “By creating a production company in Asia, we increase Sony Pictures’ global production capacity and take another step in our overall strategy of producing (movies) in key markets around the world.”³² Therefore, my goal here is not reconstruct an “origin” timeline of Sony’s LLP operations. This would not only serve as a futile exercise considering the overlapping nature of Sony’s expansion but also be a task too large for this project. Instead, I am more interested in illustrating how quickly and simultaneously these international operations were established and expanded across various cultural linguistic regions during this period.

Overall, this appears to be Sony’s LLP strategy: choosing a large film market in a specific region, establishing Sony operations of some sort and then expanding to other markets in that region. For example, beginning in Hong Kong, Sony has expanded into co-productions within East Asia, Southeast Asia and, more recently, the Middle East. In the past decade, Sony has moved throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America operations into locations such as United Kingdom, Spain, India, Australia, Mexico, and Russia.³³ In 2007, SPE consolidated its international operations under a new division called International Motion Picture Production Group (IMPPG), which SPE CEO Amy Pascal suggested: “As a global company, this move reflects our commitment to artists and filmmakers who are telling stories in their own language for audiences in their own

³¹ “Sony Pictures unveils moviemaking unit in Asia.” *Reuters*. 28 September 1998.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Pflanner; Namrata Joshi. “Hari Meets Sally” *Outlook (India)* 7 November 2005; Holson.



countries as well as around the world.”³⁴

Benefits of LLP strategy

One of the main questions of this project is: why would a company like Sony undertake a wide-scale LLP strategy? In other words, what are the main reasons beyond the typical public relations sound bites about discovering new talent or exercising “international goodwill”?³⁵ Primarily, non-U.S. markets have become a central profit center in recent decades. In 1999, CEO John Calley cited an increased importance of the international market. Since the 1970s “you got 30% of your income from international [as compared to domestic]. Now it’s almost reverse.”³⁶ According to a 2009 Motion Picture Association of America report, international or foreign box office returns make 64 percent or \$19.3 billion of its members’ earnings, whereas domestic (U.S. and Canada) consists only of 36 percent or \$10.6 billion. While the two to one ratio has been a consistent distribution since the early 2000s, this reflects more than a 200 percent jump from international profits since the middle of the twentieth century.³⁷ As multiplexes have been constructed and spread across Europe, Latin American, and Asia in the past few decades, demand has increased for more film content and conglomerates like Sony have seen their audiences increase.³⁸

One of the main reasons for widespread investment in local productions is that comparatively they carry little financial risk. For example, Sony’s recent co-production of *Chico Xavier* (2010, dir. Daniel Filho) with Lereby and Globo Filmes cost \$12

³⁴ Alex Veiga. “Sony Pictures Creates new international film division.” Associated Press. 30 April 2007.

³⁵ Nicole LaPorte. “Local pix pique H’wood” *Variety*. 12 September 2004.

³⁶ Frank Rose. “Think Globally, Script locally.” *Fortune* November 1999.

³⁷ Joseph D Phillips. “Film Conglomerate Blockbusters: International Appeal and Product Homogenization.” *The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures*. Ed. Gorham Kindem. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982. 325-335.

³⁸ Pflanner.



million reais (US\$6.6 million today).³⁹ In turn, the film attracted the largest national audiences in over 20 years and marks the continued growth of the local market.⁴⁰ Local productions typically are less expensive than the average mid-range English-language film budget, which in 2010 ranges from \$45 to 60 million for above-the-line costs and before prints and advertising (P&A). In addition to theatrical release, DVD and broadcasting helps these films achieve further local profitability and visibility.⁴¹ Since these films are intended for limited audiences, they require not only less money on the front-end but also P&A, distribution, and exhibition costs.

Increased international operations reflect larger economic shifts in the global film industry, particularly with large transnational corporation such as Sony scrambling to makeup for the declining domestic box office.⁴² Hy Hollinger points to larger “forces of globalization, new technology, industrialization and free trade.” Furthermore, he suggests “the major changes in the international marketplace, augmented by political and cultural pressure and a pool of top-notch local filmmaking talent, sees the majors turning to local language films to supplement their offshore box office income and help maintain their costly, worldwide distribution operations.”⁴³ Similar to the relationship between Latin American television satellite channels and Sony’s media content in the 1990s, Sony’s domestic and international film divisions are connected and somewhat interdependent. Whether they are producing films for a global or local audience, the LLP strategy assumes the production on one level supplements the production on the other. Not surprisingly, the domestic and international box offices are not conceived of as separate but more as integrated, symbiotic units of the SPE media machine at best.

³⁹ “Filme sobre *Chico Xavier* chega a 3 milhões de espectadores” *Estadao.com.br*. 6 maio 2010. accessed 1 June 2010.

⁴⁰ Marcelo Cajueiro. Booming Brazilian box office. *Variety*. 14 May 2010. Accessed 1 July 2010.

⁴¹ LaPorte.

⁴² John Jay Epstein. The Vanishing Box Office. *Slate*. 5 July 2005. <http://www.slate.com/id/2122000> Accessed 1 July 2010.

⁴³ Hy Hollinger. “Distribs speaking their language.” *Hollywood Reporter*. 10 May 2005.



Furthermore, local tax incentives can help cushion costs through tax breaks for investing in local productions. In the past two decades, numerous countries from Ireland to Mexico have passed aggressive local tax incentives to attract film productions and investments. These incentives have been a deciding factor for establishing LLP operations in major Latin American markets, particularly in Brazil. In the 1990s, the Brazilian film industry underwent a number of structural, institutional, and policy changes namely the transformation from a state-run to commercially driven film industry funded by private investment after the 1990 dismantling of Embrafilme, the state-supported film enterprise as part of a neo-liberal recipe to overhaul the national economy.⁴⁴ As a way to rebuild local filmmaking and become more competitive on the national and transnational level, the government passed a series of tax incentives to encourage private investment—the 1991 *Lei Rouanet* (Rouanet Law, No. 8,313) and the *Prêmio Resgate do Cinema Brasileiro* (Rescue Award).⁴⁵ The restructuring of state film agencies and the incentives aimed to facilitate relationships between corporate investors, both national and transnational, stimulated film production and led to “*o retomada*” [the rebirth] from 1995-8. The early policies, and subsequent funding initiatives, succeeded in attracting external, private funding to boost Brazilian filmmaking and commercialize the industry. Due to these incentive programs, Sony entered the industry in a new position and began co-producing and distributing three to four Brazilian films per year.⁴⁶ As already mentioned, many of these films performed well with local audiences, beating audience and profit records and solidifying the position of Sony do Brasil in the local industry.

⁴⁴ José Álvaro Moisés. “A new policy for Brazilian Cinema.” in *The New Brazilian Cinema*. ed. Lúcia Nagib. London: I.B. Taurus, 2003: 7.

⁴⁵ Cacilda Rêgo. “Brazilian cinema: its fall, rise and renewal (1990-2003).” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*. 3 (2005): 85.

⁴⁶ Filmes Co-Produzidos e distribuídos pelas companhias associadas á MPA. MPAA website. <http://www.mpaal.org.br/br/filmes.htm>. Accessed 15 January 2010.



Yet, this strategy is not fail proof. Not all LLPs, or any film for that matter, operate or perform as hoped. After all, SPE learned that lesson with big budget English-language flops such as *Last Action Hero* (1993, dir. John McTiernan).⁴⁷ LLP challenges include complicated local tax codes and distribution rights. The home language markets, audiences, and consequently profits for these films are small. While one of Sony's tentpole pictures may be released widely in about 3,700 U.S. theaters, venues are limited in markets such as Russia, Brazil, and Mexico. For example, a "big" opening for a LLP in Brazil is 200 theaters.⁴⁸

Localization or imperialism?

Significantly, Sony and other transnational media companies discuss their LLP operations in terms of cultural immersion or localization. For example, executives spend time becoming "fluent in each countries' business practices" by working closely with local producers and filmmakers.⁴⁹ One method for integration into the local film industry is through partnerships. For co-producing LLPs in Brazil, Sony partnered with local media conglomerate, Globo Filmes, beginning in 1998. Teaming up with Globo guarantees the network's signature "production quality" as well as their knowledge of local audiences and markets. In turn, Globo received the production capital and distribution resources needed to catapult its film production branch and secure a strong position within the industry over the past decade.

Because of this turn towards cultural investment, some executives argue their LLPs should be categorized and treated as part of local or national cinema. For example, a Fox international operations executive: "If we produce in the country of origin – in the language and culture of the country – we should be treated just like a

⁴⁷ "Sony's *Last Action Hero*, a real disaster movie." *Business Wire*. 22 February 1994.

⁴⁸ Holson; "Filme sobre Chico Xavier chega a 3 milhões de espectadores"

⁴⁹ Leigh.



local company . . . we should get the same benefits as a local producer.”⁵⁰ Wigan sees Sony contributing and investing in local economies: “This is not Hollywood coming to work in Europe . . . these are genuinely European films.”⁵¹ Yet, this perception or position varies from region to region. Whereas in Europe Sony may view themselves as “locals,” Wigan describes its new entrance into Indian productions through a food metaphor; the Indian market is a meal of diverse choices with American films as dishes to compliment what is already on the table.⁵²

However, there is a critical push against the massive size, scale, and powerful position of media transnationals. Similar in tone to the American protectionist backlash Sony witnessed upon its Columbia purchase in 1989, local government officials and filmmakers are not always welcoming of a new industry player. In Brazil, both Sony and Globo have benefited from the partnership, yet many within the industry question how this is truly benefiting Brazilian cinema as a whole. According to filmmaker Aluizio Abranches, “one of the obstacles facing Brazilian cinema is the Globo-Columbia duo. If you are not connected with this duo, then you have few chances for success. So, the biggest problem is the exhibition and distribution. The public is only going where Globo Filmes is involved. [His 2002 film] *As Três Marias* was seen more in Italy than here”.⁵³ Since 1995, almost all of the top grossing 20 Brazilian films have been produced by Globo and half of those have been co-productions with Sony do Brasil.⁵⁴ For many producers in the Brazilian film industry, the dominant position of Globo Filmes and its transnational media partners creates a complicated situation in a supposedly open commercial market. The relationship between Globo Filmes and Sony

⁵⁰ Hollinger.

⁵¹ Pflanner.

⁵² Anand Giridharadas. “Bollywood fare from Hollywood.” *Business Times Singapore*, 9 August 2007.

⁵³ Aluizio Abranches. “3 anos de *Revista de Cinema*.” in *Revista de Cinema*. (julho de 2003), 33.

⁵⁴ Ranking Filme Nacional 1995-2009 (por público). Filme B. <http://www.filmeb.com.br/portal/html/graficosetabelas.php> Accessed 15 July 2010.



reflects what Frank Rose regards as the emergence of a new two-tier system in global filmmaking: “English is the language of the international blockbuster, but lower-budget pictures can be made in almost any language for the home market, and a few . . . will even become international hits. Hollywood, with its vast corporate resources, can call the shots in both tiers. All it has to learn is how not to reduce the world to cultural mush.”⁵⁵ This two-tier system sees LLPs as another example of Hollywood’s hegemonic history in which international companies Sony, Warner Bros., Fox and so on continue to hold the position of power in local markets. From this point of view, Sony uses its vast resources and influence to adapt these strategies locally and allow the media company a stronger position in local markets.

In recent years, Sony’s executives have responded directly to these claims of imperialism and imposition. The company acknowledges the advantage they bring as a large-scale organization with infrastructure and resources to invest in local films.⁵⁶ Yet, Wigan argues: “We’re not carpetbaggers. Our goal is to put down roots and become part of the native talent pool and culture.”⁵⁷ Current head of Sony’s international division IMPPG, Schindler acknowledges these concerns by largely defending their position: “Sure we’re coming into these territories from Hollywood, but we’re not going to impose Hollywood on them. It’s not the way I approach it.”⁵⁸

While numerous industrial accounts of the LLP strategy reflect a desire for integration, cooperation, and investment in these local industries, there also exists an implicit tone of corporate arrogance. Sony’s William Pfeiffer compares the LLP to marrying the best of local “rich culture” with the “professionalism and the polish of

⁵⁵ Rose.

⁵⁶ Hollinger.

⁵⁷ Leigh.

⁵⁸ Swart.



Hollywood.”⁵⁹ Many executives presume the lack of professionalism or “quality” available locally only can be developed by production companies also working in Hollywood. This presents Sony less as a benevolent partner but as a knowledgeable parent aiding the young industries. These discussions completely gloss over a long history of distribution, financial resources, dominant position of English-language media, and other advantages held by these transnational film companies.

One of the most direct discussions of Sony’s LLP strategy emerged from CEO Michael Lynton’s 2007 opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal*. Lynton questions the direct correlation between globalization and homogenization and defends Hollywood’s role in diversifying glocal markets. He claims the globalization of the entertainment business and box office success of Sony films such as *Spiderman 3* (2007, dir. Sam Raimi) are not “turning the world into an American shopping mall” but instead “encouraging the proliferation of cultural diversity.” Engaging in academic debates regarding media imperialism and globalization, Lynton contends “these are not signs of Hollywood’s homogenizing effect on the world. They are signs of the world changing the way Hollywood works. It makes sense to marry our production, marketing and distribution experience with the growing global appetite for entertainment tailor-made by and for a variety of cultures.” He argues Sony’s localization trend is the proof of heterogeneous, mediated culture, whereas “Hollywood is not simply a place in Southern California. It is a symbol of an entertainment culture which is becoming as diverse as it is universal.”⁶⁰

The same summer SPE consolidated its LLP operations under one division, IMPPG, Lynton attempts to shape the conversation within the film industry to benefit Sony.

From his polished public relations perspective, producing both global blockbusters and

⁵⁹ Rose; Shedde.

⁶⁰ Michael Lynton. “Globalization and Cultural Diversity.” *The Wall Street Journal*. 5 September 2007.



local pictures benefits their international audiences through diversification. Yet, he is clearly speaking from an American film executive subject position as he contends that Hollywood is a ubiquitous and universal space, whether they producing in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, or Rio de Janeiro. Even though the media content is tailor-made for a Brazilian or Chinese audience, the powerful hand that assembles the clothing, or in this case finances and produces the film, should be examined and questioned.

Conclusion

Overall, the objective for this paper was to offer a broad overview of the local language strategy as developed and utilized by the media conglomerate Sony. By examining trade journal, interviews, box office and institutional history, my research offer a general industrial history of the changing nature of transnational film co-productions. Significantly, Sony has begun to adopt certain language such as the term “localization” in order to actively fashion their international operations and practices. Through the emergence of the LLP strategy, SPE, particularly in the case of Brazil, is presented as a flexible producing partners with the ability to adapt to any local industry and market. While my paper offers an institutional history and discursive analysis of the LLP strategy, my future project will extend this research to examine how the LLP operates on a local level, specifically in Brazil. If the LLP is indeed as “local”, it is necessary to understand how this strategy functions on within a local industry and not from the language of corporate public relations and media mouthpieces. Who are the production companies, filmmakers, and producers working with Sony do Brasil to develop LLPs? How do Brazilian filmmakers and producers articulate their relationship with Sony? By conducting interviews and periodical research in Brazil, I hope to



extend this project to understand the LLP from various geographical, institutional, and cultural perspectives.