Cultural and Religious Studies, October 2026, Vol. 14, No. 10, 665-677
doi: 10.17265/2328-2177/2026.10.005

Ideological Encoding and Cross-Cultural Communication of Hollywood B-Movies: An Analysis Based on Theoretical Frameworks and Exemplary Cases

Dong Zhaoyang
Macao University of Science and Technology, Macao SAR, China
Ye Ting
Hebei Institute Of Communications, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China

Hollywood B-movies, characterized by low production budgets, generic conventions, and intense sensory stimulation, constitute an indispensable component of the Hollywood film ecosystem. Drawing upon Roland Barthes' narratological theory of mythology, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, and Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework encompassing "micro-level semiotic encoding—meso-level communicative decoding—macro-level power regulation." The study systematically traces the evolutionary trajectory of B-movies from commercial appendages to independent cultural carriers. At the micro level, this research examines the encoding logic through which generic signs construct ideological myths; at the meso level, it reveals the meaning-negotiation mechanisms generated through multiple decoding modes in cross-cultural communication; at the macro level, it elucidates the pathways through which B-movies negotiate code censorship with dominant power structures. The findings demonstrate that B-movies penetrate cultural barriers through potent sensory signs and activate cross-cultural communicative dynamism via polyvalent decoding spaces. They function both as covert vehicles for American cultural soft power export and as mature paradigms for global low-budget genre film production and distribution.

Keywords: Hollywood B-movies, ideological encoding, cross-cultural communication, mythology, Ideological State Apparatuses

Introduction

Leveraging its sophisticated production system and global distribution networks, the Hollywood film industry has long occupied a dominant position in global cultural communication, profoundly shaping cultural perceptions and aesthetic preferences among audiences worldwide. Within this vast industrial landscape, low-budget B-movies have demonstrated remarkable market vitality and cultural tension through distinctive subject selection, generic modes of expression, and extreme presentations of specific cultural elements. However, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on the industrial models and aesthetic evolution of B-movies, or on the ideological communication mechanisms of Hollywood blockbusters. Systematic three-dimensional

Dong Zhaoyang, Ph.D., University International College, Macao University of Science and Technology, Macao SAR, China.
Ye Ting, Master, The School of Film and Television Art, Hebei Institute of Communications, Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China.

theoretical analysis of B-movies' ideological encoding logic, meaning production, and power negotiations in cross-cultural communication remains conspicuously absent in academic discourse. This paper attempts to fill this research gap by constructing an integrated framework of "micro-level semiotic encoding—meso-level communicative decoding—macro-level power regulation" to conduct an in-depth analysis of the cultural operational mechanisms of Hollywood B-movies.

In recent years, Hollywood superhero films have encountered developmental difficulties, a trend that has become increasingly pronounced following the release of *Avengers: Endgame*, with multiple productions suffering the embarrassment of both critical and commercial failure. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* grossed only 186 million RMB in mainland China, while *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* earned merely 214 million RMB. These figures clearly reflect audiences' profound aesthetic fatigue toward formulaic narratives and vacuous value expression. Nevertheless, Hollywood's ideological communication has not ceased. Dark-themed films represented by *Joker* have emerged as a powerful force—produced on a budget of merely 55 million USD, this film grossed 1.074 billion USD worldwide. Its portrayal of socially marginalized groups and anti-hero narrative successfully broke the creative impasse of superhero films. Concurrently, B-movies such as *Pearl* and *The Substance* have become crucial instruments for Hollywood to address market aesthetic fatigue through extreme generic expression and the production model of "low budget, high creativity." Turning to China's film market, tentpole productions similarly face innovation bottlenecks. What insights, then, can the creative mechanisms and distribution pathways of B-movies offer to China's film industry? The formulation of this question constitutes the practical starting point of this study.

Conceptual Definition and Historical Evolution of Hollywood B-Movies

Conceptual Definition and Core Characteristics

The definition of Hollywood B-movies has undergone dynamic evolution from traditional to contemporary conceptualizations. B-movies originated in the "double feature" system during the Great Depression of the 1930s. As Wang (2017) explicitly defined in relevant research, B-movies refer to films with low production budgets (the "B" designation here is categorized based on production investment), characterized by short shooting schedules and limited production budgets, meaning both temporal and economic costs are lower than those of conventional films. This model emerged from theater operators' business strategies to address declining profits—audiences could watch one big-budget film and one supplementary low-budget film with a single ticket, hence the designation "B-movie." Early B-movies typically featured no A-list stars, with subject matter concentrated on established genres such as westerns, gangster films, science fiction, and horror. Simultaneously, because directors were granted considerable creative freedom and low-budget film producers interfered minimally with shooting, the permissive production environment allowed directors to fully exercise their talents, generating a substantial proportion of experimental films and distinctive director-driven series (Wang, 2017). Although B-movies occupied a marginal position in industrial positioning during this period, the advantage of creative freedom had already emerged, laying the groundwork for their future role as a hotbed of cinematic innovation.

Since the 21st century, globalization has propelled the transformation of B-movies, as the concept broke through its original positioning as an "appendage" to form a broader definitional category centered on "low budget, generic conventions, and intense sensory stimulation." Qi (2018) observed that B-movies often convey impressions of roughness, directness, and strong sensory stimulation, with subject matter typically associated with comedy, horror, violence, and sexuality. Straightforward subject matter constitutes an effective and proven

strategy for low-budget B-movies to attract audiences. Unlike the contemplation and spectacular appreciation offered by A-films, B-movies satisfy and provide catharsis for human desires. Cao (2020) emphasized in her analysis that while low cost and limited budget indeed represent important indicators for defining B-movies, the concept is actually more extensive and dynamic. On the other hand, some B-movies demonstrate sophisticated production and aesthetic originality. Works such as *Pearl* and *The Substance* retain classic generic elements including gore and psychological horror while breaking the stereotypical perception of "crude production." *Pearl* constructs a suffocating inner labyrinth through deliberate psychological narrative, elevating the expressive level of B-movies from superficial sensory stimulation to the depth of human deconstruction by portraying the protagonist's psychological breakdown in extreme circumstances. *The Substance* employs body horror as a narrative vehicle, reflecting on the entertainment industry's consumption logic regarding body aesthetics through the collision of nudity and monstrous elements. Precisely this characteristic distinguishes B-movies from commercial entertainment films that purely pursue sensory stimulation, endowing them with deeper value for ideological expression and cultural reflection, and establishing them as cultural texts that cannot be ignored within the Hollywood film ecosystem.

Simultaneously, digital technology has broken through production cost constraints, and online streaming platforms have become new distribution venues, fundamentally transforming the production and communication ecology of B-movies. In the context of globalization, B-movies have begun to integrate multicultural elements, expanding their audience from niche fans to broader young viewers. For instance, Asian horror aesthetics have been implanted into works such as the American remake of *The Ring*, forming new modes of cross-cultural narrative; works like *Joker* employ dark aesthetics and anti-hero narratives to deconstruct superhero myths, eliciting widespread global audience resonance regarding the plight of socially marginalized groups. This transformation indicates that B-movies are no longer low-end supplements within the Hollywood industrial system, but have become important textual forms in global cultural flows.

Li (2007) noted that B-movies continue to be celebrated by critics because they periodically produce carefully crafted, astonishingly creative works that even serve as vanguards of their era, containing serious social critique while employing styles distinct from mainstream expression, functioning as subtexts of American history and society. This characteristic is particularly prominent in the work of "King of B-movies" Roger Corman. Not only did he establish an industrial benchmark for B-movies with the two-day shooting schedule of *The Little Shop of Horrors*, but he also directed over 50 films and produced more than 350 films within 15 years through low-budget strategies such as reusing sets and purchasing stock footage, with nearly every production turning a profit, forming a unique industrial survival paradigm (Li, 2007). Corman's production company became known as a "film talent incubator," nurturing renowned directors of a generation including Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola. This creative philosophy, employing genre films as vehicles, profoundly influenced the aesthetic direction of New Hollywood cinema.

Core Theoretical Framework and Analytical Dimensions

To systematically and profoundly analyze the ideological operational mechanisms and cross-cultural communication logic of Hollywood B-movies, this paper selects three core theories—Roland Barthes' narratological theory of mythology, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, and Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses—to construct a three-dimensional analytical framework of "micro-level semiotic

encoding—meso-level communicative decoding—macro-level power regulation." The core logic of this framework is as follows: Barthes' theory serves to reveal the meaning-generation mechanisms within B-movie texts; Hall's theory explains the meaning-struggle processes after texts enter cross-cultural communication fields; Althusser's theory analyzes how power structures incorporate and discipline B-movies through institutional and non-institutional codes. The three levels are mutually embedded and progressively layered, collectively constituting a complete explanation of B-movies' cultural operational logic.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes proposed that myth represents a second-order encoding of cultural signs, a process that naturalizes the original meanings of signs, transforming them into vehicles for ideological communication. Barthes' analysis begins with the fundamental structure of signs: a sign consists of a signifier (pointing to material form) and a signified (pointing to conceptual meaning). Building upon this foundation, Barthes revealed the core mechanism of mythic operation—the second-order semiotic system: in the first-order semiotic system, the signifier and signified combine to produce a sign bearing relatively direct "meaning"; in the second-order semiotic system, the entire first-order sign transforms into "form," becoming a new signifier that subsequently combines with a new signified to generate ideological signification at the mythic level.

Hao (2009) noted that Barthes employed the rose as an example to illustrate this mechanism: at the botanical level, a rose is a type of flower, but after cultural encoding, it is endowed with the mythic meaning of love, its original material properties are "hollowed out," and the cultural meaning of love is "naturalized" as an inherent attribute of the rose. In cinema, the cowboy figure in westerns constructs a mythic narrative of "freedom and justice" through combinations of signs such as wide-brimmed hats and revolvers, transmitting the ideology of American individual heroism. The core value of Barthes' theory lies in revealing how ideology permeates popular cultural texts in a "natural" guise, while audiences often unconsciously accept these seemingly natural meanings.

In "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Stuart Hall argued that media text communication comprises two relatively independent yet interrelated processes: encoding and decoding. The encoding process refers to creators' transformation of ideological intentions into texts through sign systems such as visuals and narrative, with the core objective of "naturalizing" specific meanings to facilitate audience acceptance; the decoding process refers to audiences' interpretation of textual meanings based on their own cultural backgrounds and social experiences.

The profundity of Hall's theory lies in its demonstration that no necessary symmetrical relationship exists between encoding and decoding—audiences' decoding outcomes may completely align with creators' encoding intentions, partially deviate from them, or even stand in direct opposition. Based on this premise, Hall proposed three typical audience decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic decoding, in which audiences fully accept creators' encoding intentions and interpret within the established code order; negotiated decoding, in which audiences partially accept encoding intentions while simultaneously adjusting meanings according to their specific contexts, seeking balance between acceptance and resistance; and oppositional decoding, in which audiences completely subvert creators' encoding intentions, generating interpretations opposed to encoded presuppositions.

Taking B-movies as an example, alien creature figures in 1950s science fiction B-movies were predominantly interpreted by contemporary audiences through the dominant framework of "Cold War threat," while contemporary audiences often engage in negotiated decoding from an entertainment perspective; the graphic violence within these films, possessing strong sensory impact properties, can partially transcend cultural

contextual limitations to form cross-demographic appeal. Hall's threefold decoding model provides an important theoretical tool for analyzing meaning transformations in B-movies' cross-cultural communication.

In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser proposed that the state maintains ruling order through two systems: Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses. Repressive State Apparatuses center on violent institutions such as government, military, and law, operating through overt coercive force; Ideological State Apparatuses employ non-violent domains such as education, culture, and media as vehicles, achieving social governance through covert ideological infiltration.

Althusser specifically emphasized that cinema constitutes an important Ideological State Apparatus, as films' plot design, character construction, and narrative logic all serve the transmission of dominant values. Hollywood mainstream cinema employs individual hero narratives to convey democratic and libertarian values, strengthening audience identification with social institutions. The insight from this theory is that although B-movies often appear in anti-mainstream, taboo-challenging guises, they do not exist outside the regulation of Ideological State Apparatuses; rather, they complete their distribution through complex negotiations with these apparatuses. The regulation of B-movies by Repressive State Apparatuses manifests in overt measures such as rating systems and content censorship; Ideological State Apparatuses, meanwhile, filter and domesticate through covert means including cultural conventions, market rules, and public opinion. Together, these constitute the power field that B-movies must navigate.

The three theories outlined above are not mutually isolated but form a complete analytical chain from text internality to communication processes to power fields. Barthes' narratological theory of mythology focuses on semiotic operations within B-movie texts, revealing how generic elements transform into ideological myths through second-order encoding; Hall's encoding/decoding theory extends the perspective from texts to audiences, explaining how B-movies generate polyvalent decoding and meaning negotiations after entering different cultural contexts; Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses situates B-movies within broader social power structures, analyzing how censorship systems and cultural codes incorporate and domesticate them.

The three dimensions proceed from inside to outside, from micro to macro, collectively pointing to B-movies' cultural operational logic: they both encode and deconstruct ideology within texts and undergo polyvalent meaning struggles during communication processes, ultimately completing negotiated coexistence with dominant culture under the regulation of power structures. By selecting these three theories, this paper aims to analyze the cultural essence and social value of B-movies in a multi-dimensional, three-dimensional manner.

Core Analysis of Ideological Encoding and Cross-Cultural Communication in Hollywood B-Movies

Micro-Level Semiotic Encoding: B-Movies' Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Dominant Semiotic Hegemony

Examined from the perspective of Barthes' narratological theory of mythology, the rise and fall of superhero films essentially reflects changes in the encoding efficiency of second-order semiotic systems for ideology. The market success of such films stemmed from their successful naturalization of American values as universal myths; their recent decline, however, is rooted in the disjuncture between their semiotic systems and real-world contexts, a disjuncture that has caused the collapse of meaning-production chains. Hao (2009) pointed out in "The 'Mythological' Method in Roland Barthes' Literary and Cultural Criticism" that Barthes employed "myth" to

designate the internal mechanism through which cultural signs produce ideology and "naturalize" it, with myth actually constituting a second-order semiotic system: the first order is the linguistic system, in which signifier and signified combine to produce signs; the second order takes first-order signs as signifiers, forming new signs with certain cultural or ideological signifieds. This mechanism is clearly evidenced in the rise and fall of superhero films.

Early superhero films successfully constructed an efficiently operating mythic sign system, with the Marvel Cinematic Universe serving as a paradigmatic case. *Iron Man* was released in 2008; produced on a budget of 140 million USD, it grossed 580 million USD worldwide, officially inaugurating Marvel's glorious era. Iron Man's armor initially signified technology and combat capability, constituting the text's first-order signified; in Marvel's subsequent narrative construction, the armor sign was further elevated, as American innovative spirit and the mission of world salvation were injected into it, elevating ideological concepts to second-order signifieds. The armor thus became a core mythic sign bearing American values. This practice of cleverly packaging American values within superhero figures completely aligns with the mythic operation of "naturalizing" ideology revealed by Barthes. While appreciating action sequences and special effects spectacles, audiences unconsciously accepted the American values concealed within them at the cognitive level.

The cinematic universe carefully constructed by Marvel formed a vast mythological system: through the network strategy of cross-narration between standalone films and *The Avengers* series, the connotation and denotation of heroic myths were continuously reinforced. Standalone films enriched characters' first-order semiotic meanings, while *The Avengers* series achieved grand convergence of multiple narrative threads, creating a puzzle-like viewing experience. Ultimately, *Avengers: Endgame* grossed 2.798 billion USD worldwide, confirming this mythological system's powerful attraction to global audiences through irrefutable market data.

However, over time, superhero films' semiotic systems gradually became rigidified. Films excessively relied on visual effects spectacle, causing what Barthes' theory terms "first-order signifier inflation"—formal aspects became increasingly elaborate and ornate, while the signified meaning core became increasingly attenuated; simultaneously, works neglected in-depth character portrayal and organic embedding of social issues, resulting in empty second-order signifieds and complete failure of myth's ideological function. *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*, released in 2023, represents a typical example of this predicament: the film emphasized displaying the bizarre visual effects of the Quantum Realm while remaining extremely feeble in emotional expression and intellectual content, with global box office plummeting 40% compared to its predecessor in the franchise. From Barthes' theoretical perspective, the heroic signs in this film had degenerated into pure visual carriers, losing effective connection with audiences' emotional values and unable to complete the naturalized transmission of ideology. The deeper problem lies in the fact that the "American salvation" narrative presupposed by Marvel's mythological system created severe disjuncture with audiences' real life experiences in the face of global challenges such as pandemic spread, economic downturn, and social division. For myth to function, audiences must perceive the meanings it conveys as "natural"; when reality continuously falsifies the order promised by myth, this naturalization mechanism fails.

Precisely against this backdrop, the core value of B-movies becomes manifest—they can deconstruct and reconstruct those already rigidified mythological systems. *Joker* employs anti-hero narrative strategies to completely subvert the second-order semiotic system of heroic myth: the Joker mask in the film, associated with comedy and happiness in the first-order semiotic system (first-order signifier), is bound through new second-

order encoding with the despair of the underclass and violent actions against capitalist oppression, with underclass despair and resistance thus becoming new second-order signifieds. Through gloomy cinematography and immersive psychological portrayal, the work deconstructs the rigidified mindset of "justice defeating evil," completely shifting the narrative core from the traditional model of elites saving the world to constructing underclass resistance.

Pearl, meanwhile, accomplishes its deconstructive mission through more extreme visual semiotic operations: the unforgettable "bloody ballet" sequence in the film employs powerful visual signifiers to completely deconstruct the traditional myth of the American Dream. Pearl's pink ballet dress naturally connotes dreams and beauty in the first-order semiotic system (first-order signifier); but through second-order encoding, the film tightly binds the dress with the falsity of Hollywood's dream-manufacturing mechanism and individual alienation in the pursuit of dreams, breaking the American Dream mythic framework that "hard work achieves dreams." What the film ultimately accomplishes is critical reconstruction of dominant ideological signs—after deconstructing old myths, it reveals to audiences Hollywood's own ideological nature as a dream-making machine.

Meso-Level Communicative Decoding: Meaning Negotiations in B-Movies' Cross-Cultural Communication

Hall's encoding/decoding theory provides a powerful tool for understanding the complex meaning transformations in B-movies' cross-cultural communication. The theory reveals that in cross-cultural communication processes, an essential possibility of dislocation exists between creators' encoding intentions and audiences' decoding outcomes. Creators complete ideological encoding through a system of signs, while audiences produce polyvalent and even opposed decoding outcomes based on their different cultural contexts, social experiences, and cognitive frameworks. This meaning negotiation both reflects power tensions within cultural fields and endows B-movies with distinctive cross-cultural communicative dynamism.

Wan (2009), citing Lévi-Strauss in "Modern Understanding and Narration of Myth," noted that myth itself is changing: "the same myth transforms from one variant to another," and "any myth can always generate from another myth"; he further explained that myth's transformation "from one variant to another essentially involves constructing new mythic worlds utilizing existing mythic resources." This judgment forms an internal resonance with Hall's encoding/decoding theory—different cultural contexts, like mythic "variants," endow the same text with differentiated meaning spaces. Huang (2016), in rereading Hall's "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," pointed out that Hall drew upon Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" and Parkin's typology of meaning systems to propose decoding position hypotheses including "dominant or hegemonic codes, negotiated codes, and oppositional codes." Hall emphasized that "encoding" and "decoding" moments possess "relative autonomy" in communication processes; events must undergo transformation through specific grammatical rules to enter message forms; creators encode through sign systems, injecting ideological intentions into texts, while audiences decode based on their own social experiences, producing interpretations that may align with encoding intentions or may be severely dislocated (Huang, 2016). This theoretical framework has been continuously validated in B-movies' cross-cultural communication practices.

Taking the cross-cultural communication of B-movie *Pearl* as an example, the simultaneous operation of three decoding modes can be clearly observed. The creators combined the historical context of the 1918 influenza pandemic with extreme scenes of bloody self-harm, intending to encode collective anxiety and social trauma

from the pandemic era into horror narrative. This encoding itself follows the principle of semiotic polysemy described by Hall: violent scenes function both as signifiers of direct sensory stimulation and serve the signified function of bearing social trauma memories, forming a two-tier meaning structure of inner sensory stimulation and outer social metaphor.

Upon entering cross-cultural communication fields, audiences from different cultural contexts produced significantly differentiated decoding pathways: American audiences, having personally experienced the collective trauma of COVID-19, mostly engaged in dominant decoding from the perspective of pandemic trauma memories, relatively close to creators' original encoding intentions; Chinese audiences, lacking direct historical experience surrounding the 1918 pandemic and rarely connecting the film's horror narrative with contemporary American social anxiety, were more inclined to consume the film as an object of retro horror aesthetics, constituting typical negotiated decoding; some Western film critics, meanwhile, interpreted the film's extreme violent scenes from the perspective of clash of civilizations theory as Orientalist imagination of the East by the West, forming oppositional decoding almost completely opposed to creators' encoding intentions. The same text presenting three entirely different decoding pathways fully embodies Hall's theoretical insight that "no necessary symmetry exists between encoding and decoding."

Huang (2016), analyzing the semiotic mechanisms of violent elements in westerns, pointed out that violent elements "cannot achieve signification through themselves alone," and their signifying function "depends on their relationships with other elements or units." Intense sensory elements such as gore and violence in B-movies similarly follow this semiotic law: through their direct physiological stimulation properties, they can partially penetrate meaning barriers in specific cultural contexts to form cross-cultural demographic appeal. However, even when sharing the same sensory stimulation, meaning interpretation remains powerfully constrained by deep cultural backgrounds. The torture scenes in the *Hostel* series generated widespread attention and discussion globally, but Western audiences were more inclined to interpret them within philosophical frameworks of "human alienation," while Eastern audiences focused more on the sensory experiences brought by visual stimulation itself. As Huang (2016) summarized, communication effect errors at the denotative level can be understood as technical issues, while "misunderstandings" at the connotative level represent "cultural-political issues in the anthropological sense." This systematic dislocation between encoding intentions and decoding outcomes typically exemplifies the deep intervention of cultural contexts in meaning production within Hall's theory.

Entering the era of network communication, audiences' decoding initiative has been further activated, with decoding behavior itself increasingly characterized by productivity and recreation. The 2022 version of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* encountered large-scale user secondary creation on short-video platforms, as the terrifying sign of Leatherface was re-encoded in countless short videos, transformed into cultural metaphors of resistance against capitalist oppression, completely subverting the original film's horror narrative logic. This phenomenon precisely confirms the extension of Hall's theory in the digital age: in traditional media eras, audiences' oppositional decoding mostly remained at the level of individual interpretation; in social media eras, however, users' secondary creation amplifies oppositional decoding into visible cultural practice, and may even reciprocally influence subsequent text production. Meaning negotiation thus ceases to be static confrontation between encoders and decoders, instead evolving into a continuously ongoing, multi-polar interactive dynamic process.

Macro-Level Power Regulation: B-Movies' Censorship Negotiations and Code Domestication

Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses provides an explanatory framework from the macro power dimension for analyzing B-movies' differentiated fates across different distribution channels. From this perspective, theatrical censorship and online platform regulation can be clearly seen as representing two distinct natures of power operation: theatrical censorship directly regulates B-movies' ideological expression boundaries through coercive codes; online distribution, meanwhile, is subject to covert filtering by non-coercive cultural codes. Despite different operational modes, both essentially represent dominant power structures' meaning domestication of B-movies through code systems.

Althusser proposed in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" that cinema, as an important component of Ideological State Apparatuses, inevitably has its distribution subject to covert regulation by dominant power structures through code systems. Tang (2018) further developed this perspective in "Mass Media and the Alchemy of Ideology," pointing out that such regulation includes dual dimensions: coercive code censorship systems and non-coercive code cultural conventions, which work in concert to constitute ideology's dual filtering system for cultural texts. This framework can effectively explain B-movies' differentiated fates in theatrical and online platforms.

Theatrical films are subject to direct censorship by "Repressive State Apparatuses," such as the MPAA rating system's R-rating restriction on excessively gory scenes in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The essence of this institutional operation is managing B-movies' anti-mainstream narratives within capitalist value frameworks through code classification. Although rating systems appear to be technical content classification, they actually constitute a system of power code operations, determining which content may enter mainstream theatrical distribution channels and which must be excluded to marginal zones. While online platforms belong to non-coercive ideological vehicles, they are similarly subject to covert constraints from cultural codes: when B-movie content touches taboo boundaries in specific cultural contexts, platforms' internal risk-control mechanisms automatically trigger, achieving covert filtering in forms such as "content violation." This self-censorship, cloaked in market considerations and cultural conventions, represents precisely the extended form of Ideological State Apparatuses in the digital age.

Regarding censorship negotiation mechanisms in cyberspace, the situation of Chinese online big movies provides a reference case that, while not identical to Hollywood B-movies, shares isomorphic power logic. *Mountain Village Fox Wife* was removed from platforms for containing folk horror scenes such as paper figures marrying; the superficial justification was restricting superstitious content dissemination, but at a deeper level, it represented systematic regulation of subcultural expression by socialist core values as cultural codes. This case confirms Althusser's fundamental assertion: codes themselves are power discourse vehicles selected by history, demarcating boundaries between the expressible and inexpressible.

B-movies' survival strategies in cyberspace essentially constitute processes of meticulous negotiation and struggle with ideological codes. *Yin-Yang Town Strange Tales* provides a successful example: the film cleverly transformed horror genre elements into folk cultural exhibition, employing cultural packaging strategies of intangible cultural heritage narrative to avoid direct contact with content censorship, ultimately achieving commercial success with 36 million RMB in box office revenue. This process clearly demonstrates the mechanism described by Althusser that "ideology permeates the entire process of sign production through codes"—online film creators anticipate and internalize censorship code requirements during production stages,

"translating" horror elements into display forms acceptable to dominant culture. B-movies are not absolutely prohibited; rather, through negotiation processes of meaning translation, they are incorporated into categories acceptable to mainstream culture.

The variability of censorship negotiations is equally pronounced in different versions for cross-cultural communication. When Netflix imported Korean B-movie *Sweet Home*, it retained the series' gory and violent scenes but deleted social critique dialogue addressing wealth inequality. This selective editing represents a typical case of capital codes—the global profit logic of streaming platforms—completing ideological filtering in transnational communication contexts: violent scenes may be retained because they can be transformed into "pure sensory entertainment" decoupled from ideology; but social critique must be excised because it directly touches the legitimacy foundations of the capitalist system. This meticulous code operation represents precisely the globalization extension of Althusser's theory in the digital age: Ideological State Apparatuses no longer rely solely on overt coercive means to control texts, but instead accomplish meaning domestication and value co-optation of B-movies based more on non-coercive codes such as market rules, cultural conventions, and audience demands. B-movies appear to be challenging boundaries, but in reality, within complex code fields, they continuously engage in self-adjustment and negotiated coexistence.

Industrial Value, Cultural Influence, and Chinese Lessons from Hollywood B-Movies

Industrial Value and Cultural Influence

The rise and sustained development of Hollywood B-movies essentially result from the synergistic interaction of dual driving forces: low-budget commercial operational logic and American cultural strategy export. Deeply understanding this dual nature constitutes the prerequisite for accurately assessing their industrial value and cultural influence.

At the industrial level, B-movies have long served the dual functions of "talent incubator" and "innovation experimental field" for the Hollywood film industry. Before directing *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Peter Jackson began his career with low-budget B-movies such as *Bad Taste* and *Braindead*, honing distinctive audio-visual styles and narrative control abilities within limited budgets and permissive creative environments; Quentin Tarantino's path to fame similarly originated from nourishment by B-movie culture, with his homages to and reconstructions of B-movie aesthetics having become classics in film history.

The fundamental reason B-movies can become fertile ground for talent cultivation lies in the creative trial-and-error space brought by low budgets: when film investment amounts are far lower than A-level tentpoles, producers' interference with directors naturally decreases, allowing creators greater freedom to experiment with novel narrative techniques, extreme visual styles, or marginal social subjects. Once these innovative elements, experimented with in B-movies, pass market validation, they are gradually absorbed into mainstream film creation systems, driving continuous renewal of Hollywood cinematic art as a whole. In this sense, B-movies constitute an irreplaceable innovation substrate within the Hollywood industrial ecosystem.

At the cultural communication level, B-movies represent important covert vehicles for American cultural strategy going global, with ideological export methods more insidious and permeable than those of mainstream blockbusters. From a semiotic perspective, Tang and Cheng (2018), explicating Barthes' myth theory, noted that ideology often "cleverly transforms through mass media, becoming a panacea in de-politicization and naturalization." Barthes more explicitly revealed that myth's "naturalization" essentially represents "rationalization and universalization of ruling class will," and its "naturalization and de-politicization cause the

masses to become lost in the illusion woven by ruling class ideology" (Tang & Cheng, 2018). *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* from the Cold War era metaphorized communist threat through science fiction narratives of alien invasion, naturalizing Cold War ideology as fearful imagination of "external enemies"; *Joker* of the new millennium reflects deep contradictions in contemporary American society through anarchic dark narratives. Although these works superficially present sharp critiques of social reality, their narrative strategies are actually governed by deeper ideological frameworks—the narrative closure of "problem exposure and individual resistance" ultimately reinforces the ideological presupposition that "American society possesses self-correction capabilities."

This narrative strategy of "strengthening systemic legitimacy through critique" achieves soft export of American values: audiences believe they are consuming radical works that critique the system, when in fact they have unconsciously accepted the American narrative framework's way of explaining the world.

In global distribution, B-movies have also formed a set of informal communication pathways that circumvent mainstream censorship systems. They achieve transnational penetration through piratical resource networks, fragmented editing on short-video platforms, and resource sharing on niche forums, often generating the boomerang effect of "the more prohibited, the more attractive to distribute." Taking the *Hostel* series as an example, its torture scenes generated approximately 50 million pirated downloads globally due to extreme sensory stimulation, with topics related to "taboo challenging" accounting for 39% of bullet-screen discussions. This "banning-curiosity" communication logic enabled it to successfully penetrate censorship barriers in various countries while simultaneously activating rebellious psychological identification among audiences, particularly youth groups. However, as Barthes warned, behind such seemingly authority-challenging communication phenomena may still lie "submersion in the illusion woven by ruling class ideology"—the carnival of sensory stimulation, while dissolving old censorship boundaries, may also be co-opted at unconscious levels by new semiotic consumption orders (Tang & Cheng, 2018).

More worthy of vigilance, however, is the deep ideological influence hidden beneath overt communication effects: after Korean B-movie *Sweet Home* had its "wealth inequality" critical dialogue deleted by Netflix, the retained violent scenes were successfully transformed into "pure sensory entertainment," behind which essentially lies capital codes' institutional domestication of social critical content through streaming platforms' globalization operations. B-movies' sensory stimulation wraps ideology in a seemingly harmless pleasure coating; in the process of pursuing stimulation, audiences in fact also encounter and may internalize the value presuppositions behind texts.

B-movies' cross-cultural communication poses non-negligible challenges to importing countries' cultural security. Through ideological content wrapped in "generic pleasure," they may easily cause young audiences to develop identification deviation toward Western values through imperceptible influence. When *Joker* circulated on Chinese online platforms, some audiences ignored the film's critical construction of violence, directly equating protagonist Arthur's insane actions with legitimate "resistance spirit," subsequently forming irrational worship of "anti-system heroes." This phenomenon reminds us that B-movies' ideological influence is not always overt and directly identifiable; more commonly, it infiltrates quietly while audiences are immersed in sensory experiences and emotional resonance. Faced with this situation, simple content blocking does not represent an effective approach; understanding and mastering the internal mechanisms of B-movies' ideological encoding constitutes the prerequisite for maintaining cultural security.

Conclusion

Centering on the core characteristics of Hollywood B-movies—"low budget, generic conventions, and intense sensory stimulation"—and grounded in Roland Barthes' narratological theory of mythology, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, and Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, this paper has constructed a three-dimensional analytical framework of "micro-level semiotic encoding—meso-level communicative decoding—macro-level power regulation." Under the governance of this framework, the study systematically traces B-movies' nearly century-long evolutionary trajectory from their origins in the 1930s to the present, as well as their deep connections with social ideological changes. It deeply analyzes the construction and deconstruction logic of ideological myths behind their generic signs, reveals the meaning-negotiation mechanisms generated through dominant, negotiated, and oppositional decoding modes in cross-cultural communication fields, and simultaneously explicates their complex negotiation pathways with dominant power structures in the form of code censorship and meaning translation.

Through systematic three-dimensional analysis, this paper arrives at core findings: Hollywood B-movies are by no means low-budget commercial appendages within the Hollywood industrial system; rather, having undergone evolution from marginality to independence, they have gradually developed into special cultural carriers possessing dual functions of industrial innovation and ideological communication. At the micro semiotic level, they accomplish second-order ideological encoding through extreme utilization of generic elements, and perform critical functions of deconstruction and reconstruction when dominant myths become rigidified; at the meso communication level, they penetrate cultural barriers through potent sensory signs, activate cross-cultural communicative dynamism via polyvalent decoding spaces, and achieve polyvalent meaning production in the dislocation and negotiation between encoding intentions and decoding outcomes; at the macro power level, they do not exist outside the regulation of Ideological State Apparatuses, but rather complete their own legitimated distribution through continuous negotiation with coercive codes and non-coercive cultural conventions. B-movies function both as covert and efficient vehicles for American cultural soft power export and as mature paradigms with universal reference significance for global low-budget genre film production and distribution.

Through in-depth analysis of Hollywood's film industrial structure and cultural communication mechanisms, B-movies' developmental pathways provide multi-dimensional new perspectives for China's film industry to break through creative bottlenecks and enhance international communication capabilities. From industrial innovation to talent cultivation, from generic expression to soft value communication, from content security to cultural confidence, B-movies' experiences and lessons offer concrete and operable lessons for the innovative development and international communication of China's film industry. When drawing upon these experiences, China's film industry should adhere to the principle of critical absorption, and on the basis of profoundly understanding B-movies' ideological operational mechanisms, explore a localized development path that both fully releases genre film creative vitality and upholds the bottom line of cultural security. This represents both the practical necessity of enhancing Chinese cinema's global competitiveness and the strategic requirement of safeguarding national cultural security in an increasingly complex international cultural communication landscape.

References

Cao, J. (2020). Development strategies for Chinese online feature films from the perspective of American B-movies. *Movie Literature,* (15), 36-39.

Hao, Y. (2009). The "mythology" method in Roland Barthes' literary and cultural criticism. *Jiangxi Social Sciences,* (2), 205-211.

Huang, D. (2016). Rereading Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse: Comments on Stuart Hall's methodological contributions to media cultural studies. *Journal of Journalism & Communication, 23*(5), 58-72, 127.

Li, X. (2007). Roger Corman: The king of B-movies. *Film Art,* (4), 87-94.

Qi, X. (2018). Reflections on the industrialization of online feature films from the perspective of American B-movies. *Screen World,* (6), 67-68.

Tang, X., & Cheng, T. (2018). Mass media and the alchemy of ideology. *Fujian Tribune (The Humanities & Social Sciences Monthly),* (1), 110-117.

Wan, J. (2009). Modern understanding and narration of myth. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences),* (1), 74-79.

Wang, M. (2017). The development momentum of China's current low-budget commercial films from the perspective of American B-movies during the Great Depression. *Home Drama,* (12), 134.