

An Analysis of the Development of Hollywood Science Fiction Films in China's Mainland Market in 2010s

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Abstract: Hollywood science fiction movies have long been popular with audiences in the Chinese market, and even reached their peak before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. 2019 saw a record \$4.25 billion box office for imported movies in China's mainland for Avengers IV: Endgame. However, after the 2019 epidemic, Hollywood movies are declining in the Chinese market. This paper attempts to provide a concise summary of the multifaceted social reasons behind the popularity of science fiction films, in order to find out the way to improve the current situation of Hollywood's science-fiction movie's market in China's mainland. By investigating the literature, this paper analyzed the cause of the popularity of Hollywood science fiction films in China from 2010 to 2019, the analysis involves four aspects: politics, economy, society and technology. Through this analysis, it can be found that the popularity of Hollywood science fiction movies is closely related to those four macro factors.

Keywords: Hollywood, science fiction films, literature study, Chinese film market, social analysis

1. Introduction

In China, watching Hollywood science fiction movies is a common leisure activity for people. Hollywood science-fiction movies have been popular until 2019, and since then the box office of Hollywood science-fiction movies has been declining. 2023's Avatar 2 which was originally released with the expectation of movie fans, lost to the domestic science fiction movie Wandering Earth 2 in terms of box office and discussion, with mediocre results. This reflects that the popularity of Hollywood science fiction movies from 2010 to 2019 is not only due to the production technology, but also the result of the combined efforts of many factors in the social environment.

There are abundant studies on Hollywood movies or Hollywood science-fiction movies, mainly focusing on the cultural consumption and its market across the world, but there are fewer studies that consider 2010 to 2019 as a research period. Therefore, this paper defined 2010 to 2019 as the peak period of Hollywood science fiction films in the Chinese market. By researching and looking up information, this paper aims to find out the reasons for the popularity of Hollywood science fiction films from four aspects: policy, economy, society, and technology. Furthermore, from the current situation, possible ways to improve the current situation Hollywood science-fiction movie market in China's mainland can be found.

2. The Development Status of Hollywood Science Fiction Films in China

Science fiction film, or science fantasy film, is a type of work that uses the form of fantasy art to express the vision of science and technology or the impact of social development on human beings. In fact, science fiction is a film genre with a relatively long history. The film contains science-fiction elements that can be traced back to Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* in 1902. As one of the carriers of mankind's rich imagination and curiosity, science fiction films often use the most cutting-edge production technology, showing the infinite possibilities of technology and a beautiful fantasy world to the public time and again within a century. Hollywood movies represent the movies produced by the companies set up in Hollywood, California. These producers include Paramount pictures corporation, The Walt Disney Company, Columbia Pictures Corporation, Universal Studios and Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc.

The first imported film in China is the Hollywood movie *The Fugitive* introduced in 1993[1]. At this time, China's National Film Administration only allowed 10 imported films to be imported per year. In 2001, with China's accession to the World Trade Organization, the number of imported films increased to 20 [1]. In 2012, an agreement between China and the United States added 14 more 3D and IMAX imported films [1]. At the same time, the opportunities for private enterprises to release imported films have also increased [1]. Since then, the Chinese market was opened to imported movies, and science fiction movies have become one of the most popular categories in the Chinese market, with works such as *Avatar* and *The Transformers* series reaping significant box office. From 2012 to 2019, the annual box office revenue in China was steadily increasing, from 17.07 billion yuan in 2012 to 64.27 billion yuan in 2019 [2]. In 2019, *Avengers IV: Endgame* even created a box office of 4.25 billion yuan in China, setting a new box office record for imported movies [3]. However, after the outbreak of the epidemic in 2020, the market of Hollywood science fiction films in China is declining due to various factors [4]. Comparing the annual box office revenue of 2019 and 2020 in China, it experienced a precipitous fall from 64.27 billion yuan to 20.42 billion yuan [2]. Moreover, only about one-sixth of the 20.42 billion yuan was imported movies [5]. The period from 2010 to 2019 can be regarded as the peak period of the rapid development of Hollywood science fiction films in China, and this paper analyzed the reasons contributing to the wide popularity of Hollywood science fiction films in the Chinese market by studying the previous literature.

3. Macro Environment Analysis

3.1. Political Factors

The popularity of Hollywood films in China has been fueled by Sino-American relations and some film market policies.

The situation of China's imported film market has been heavily influenced by foreign policy and international relations since the 1940s [6]. In the last century, China imported a large number of Soviet films due to its ideological similarity with the Soviet Union [6]. The first foreign movie imported into China is *The Fugitive* in 1993. Since then, the quota of imported films has been gradually liberalized, and in 2012, after the signing of the US-China film agreement, the quota of imported films was increased to 14 3D or IMAX films as special split films in addition to 20 general split films per year, and the market of imported films was liberalized [1]. In early 2010, *Avatar* was released on the mainland, reaping over a billion dollars at the box office and becoming the first film in Chinese film history to gross more than a billion dollars, initiating a decade of sought-after Hollywood films in China. In 2014, *Transformers: Age of Extinction* became the annual champion in China with another 1.9 billion dollars at the box office. *Avatar* and

Transformers: Age of Extinction are Hollywood science fiction blockbusters, and their popularity can be reflected in the box office.

However, in 2018, with the trade war between China and the United States, the international situation is tense, and the film, as an important channel of cultural exchange, is inevitably affected [7]. Even though Avengers IV: Endgame set a box office record for imported films, it did not extend the screening dates. Yet the Avengers series as a popular Intellectual property (IP), has tended to get extended release dates in previous years. This phenomenon is seen as one sign that the trade war affected the film industry. Other signs include the temporary withdrawal of domestic TV series filmed in the U.S. and the failure of Game of Thrones season 8 episode 6 to go online as scheduled. This has been one of the reasons why Hollywood science fiction films have fallen at the Chinese box office since 2019.

To sum up, imported movies, including Hollywood science fiction movies, are an important way of cultural export and one of the pillars of the cultural and entertainment industry. Therefore, it is inevitably influenced by geopolitics.

3.2. Economic Factors

Economic factors also have an impact on the film industry. Between 2010 and 2019 China's economy showed a medium to high growth rate, which was helpful for the development of the film industry. However, after 2019, due to the global epidemic and China's sealing control, the movie box office is naturally not satisfactory.

Increasing aggregate demand of the economy leads to an increase in GDP, hence economic growth indicates that there may be an increase in consumer expenditure and investment in China. As the economy grows, consumers are spending more on purchasing goods and services, including watching movies. In nature, movie demand is very elastic, which means with slightly higher income or lower price, consumers will easily purchase more movie tickets. According to the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, the annual deposit income per Chinese household in 2020 doubled from 2010. With a higher disposable income, consumers are more willing to go to the cinema and watch movies, especially for those big-budget science fiction movies. Firms are also investing more in the film industry with a higher confidence level. With more investment, the funds for producers to make films increase, which stimulates them to produce films more actively.

Therefore, a good economic condition also contributed to the development of the film industry. This is beneficial for the popularity of Hollywood science fiction movies in China from 2010 to 2019.

3.3. Social Factors

Because Hollywood science fiction films can satisfy the psychological needs of audiences, they are popular in the mainland of China.

Firstly, Hollywood science fiction blockbusters satisfy audiences' aesthetic and sensory needs and resonate with them ideologically. The first is a visual spectacle. The visual spectacle is divided into spectacle and physical spectacle. For example, the cyberpunk city in Blade Runner is a spectacle, while the alien creature in Alien is a physical spectacle. The visual spectacle in science fiction films expands consumers' imagination, satisfies the aesthetic of curiosity, and caters to audiences' needs. In addition to visuals, Hollywood movies' refined sound effects and soundtracks meet the audience's aural needs [8]. For example, the music by film score master Hans Timo in Inception plays an important role in rendering the atmosphere and completing the aesthetics of the film, satisfying the audience's sensory needs. Besides, the themes of science fiction films also easily resonate with audiences. For example, Snow Train and Interstellar condemn the destruction of the

environment by humans through their depiction of future disasters, the personal heroism expressed by Detective Comics (DC) and Marvel's series of superhero films easily makes audiences feel vicarious, and Watchmen differs from traditional hero films in that it metaphorically satirizes politics and history.

The IP movie boom is also one of the reasons for the popularity of Hollywood science fiction movies in China's mainland from 2010 to 2019. IP films are adapted from or centered around the same intellectual property [9]. For example, DC's superhero Batman is a classic IP that has lasted for two centuries, and the movies derived from this character are IP movies. During the 2010s, Hollywood has seen countless hit science fiction IPs, including Iron Man, Star Wars, Transformers, Jurassic Park, etcetera, which have created considerable box office. Behind the popularity of these IP movies are the psychological satisfaction of the audiences. The audiences or potential audiences of these IP movies include fans of the originals who look forward to the film adaptations, and fans who follow the main stars. In turn, the emergence of virtual fan communities in new media has led to the rapid gathering of fan groups, and IP movies are rapidly promoted among these groups, strengthening the influence of IP movies. In addition, on the basis of the popularity of IP movies, the herd mentality generated by the public may also contribute to the popularity of IP movies [10].

All in all, under the trend of globalization, Hollywood science fiction movies satisfy the sensory and mental needs of audiences. Among them, science fiction IP movies satisfy the fan mentality of audiences. As a result, Hollywood science fiction movies from 2010 to 2019 is successful in China's mainland.

3.4. Technological Factors

Since the world entered the industrialized society, technology and techniques have developed rapidly. This has given a strong impetus to the development of the film industry, especially science fiction films.

In 1902, Georges Méliès made *A Trip to the Moon*, which was a work of beautiful fantasy about space as evidenced by its name. In those days of black-and-white silent movies, Georges Méliès used hand-coloring in this film, which brought audiences an incomparable novelty in the viewing experience. A hundred years later, *Avatar* made cinematic 3D technology familiar to the public eye. The special effects of science fiction films are closely related to the development of technology. The maturity of computer technology has made special effects more detailed, realistic, and beautiful. Computer-generated imagery (CGI) technology is a good example. It created such dazzling and attractive elements as the robots in *Transformers*, the *Tyrannosaurus rex* reborn on screen in *Jurassic Park*, and the superpowers in the *Avengers*. These realistic special effects provide an important channel for creators to put fantasy worlds on the screen. The capital of Hollywood is strong enough to use expensive computer effects to build up one science fiction world after another.

In addition, the development of science and technology also makes people full of expectations and imagination of the future. As early as 1895, at the time of the second industrial revolution, Herbert George Wells in *The Time Machine* shows the avant-garde fantasy of the future of technology and society. The rapidly developing society and the prosperous status quo have given rise to people's expectations or worries about the uncertain future, and these emotions and perspectives are reflected in the form of science fiction by filmmakers, which attracts audiences who are speculating about the future. The prosperity of Hollywood science fiction films in the Chinese market can be seen as the result of mutual exchanges between creators and audiences in the context of global technological development.

All in all, in recent years, the rapid development of science and technology has been applied to special effects in movies, promoting the development of Hollywood science fiction movies. It has also inspired and enthused the creators of Hollywood science fiction films and stimulated the

audiences' demand for science fiction films. Technological development is thus one of the reasons for the great popularity of Hollywood science fiction films in the Chinese mainland market from 2010 to 2019.

4. Conclusions

In summary, there are four reasons for the popularity of Hollywood science fiction films from 2010 to 2019 in the mainland Chinese market. Firstly, the relative harmony of trade relations between China and the United States has contributed to the smooth importation of Hollywood films. Secondly, the economic situation can provide a suitable environment for Hollywood films to develop. Thirdly, Hollywood blockbusters can provide audiovisual enjoyment to audiences, and the themes are in line with the current social situation, resonate with audiences and satisfy their fan mentality. Lastly, technological development has facilitated the production of special effects in science fiction films, which in turn has made both creators and audiences enthusiastic about the science fiction category. This paper mainly focused on providing an overview of the macro environment of the Hollywood science-fiction movie market in China's mainland, and the amount of literature studied is relatively small. Therefore, based on this market analysis, more information can be gained from the previous research and used to further analyze the future market strategy of Hollywood science-fiction movies.

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