

# And the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Hollywood Film goes to...

A multilevel analysis of diversity in the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the diversity in the Academy Award category for Best Foreign Language Film to show how an international process of consecration is still strongly nested in a Western gaze. By studying consecration amongst an international collection of productions, this study adds to previous consecration research focusing mainly on domestic products, and previous cultural flows studies focusing mainly on economic recognition. To do this, a dataset of 2,219 films submitted for the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar between 1956-2016 was used. With a multilevel analysis, this paper uncovers which predictors affect the chances of moving from submission to nomination, and subsequently from nomination to winner. Results suggest the existence of a Hollywood bias in the Oscar category, as films directed by a director with previous ties to the industry, or distributed by a distributor with a Hollywood office, have an increased chance of getting nominated. The director-effect also holds up when analyzing the move from nomination to winner. Additionally, this paper argues that submitted films do not benefit from being released prior to the awards, as this negatively affects their probability to end up among the final nominated five films. The study concludes that, while arguing for the category as one purely for non-Hollywood related productions, Hollywood still votes for the relatively familiar productions, challenging the idea that the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film celebrates world cinema.

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## 1. Introduction

After the nominations for the 88<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards in 2016 were revealed, controversy rose about the lack of diversity. The American film prize was accused of omitting non-white nominees, as all nominees in the major categories (and in most minor categories as well) were Caucasian. Specific attention was paid to the lack of African-American nominees, despite the many contenders of that film year (Yuen, 2017). Another lack of diversity, rarely discussed, is the lack of non-American films that are nominated for major Oscar categories. Since the first Academy Awards for Best Picture in 1929, only ten nominated movies originated from a non-English speaking country. While other categories have been slightly more diverse (29 non-American directors have been nominated in the category for Best Director; 54 in Best Documentary Feature), it is clear that the Academy Awards are highly focused on Hollywood productions.

However, to also pay attention to non-American film, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences invoked the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1956. To be eligible, a movie must, as the name suggests, have a dialogue that is for the largest part in a different language than English. Therefore, non-American films with mostly English dialogue will not be taken into account, while films from English-speaking, non-American countries with a non-English dialogue are still eligible. According to Academy Award rules, a movie cannot be submitted if the country of submission does not exercise sufficient artistic control or when the movie is too strongly linked to the USA, as was the case with Taiwanese submission *Lust, Caution*, in 2007.

Being nominated for or awarded an Oscar can be seen as a form of consecration. Consecration, “separating the great from the merely good” (Allen & Lincoln, 2004, p. 874), is influenced not only by what makers do (their products) but also by who they are (their status). Previous consecration studies have mainly treated producers as individuals (or groups) producing specific commodities that can be either consecrated or not. Countries, however, have never been treated as producers. Studies of cultural world systems have distinguished more central countries with a bigger influence on cultural industries than others (De Swaan, 1995). This would indicate that cultural producers from such countries are more likely to be consecrated in a hypothetical worldwide competition than others, as they are claimed to supply the best products. If this is true, would specific countries have a higher chance of being consecrated through the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, or will Hollywood, as leader in the cultural world of film, even find a way through which it can keep the prize within Los Angeles? This study addresses these questions by answering the research question: *‘How globally*

*diverse is the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film, and to what extent can this be explained through characteristics of the submitted film and submitting countries?*

This study thus aims to analyze the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, especially focusing on diversity and potential inequality. Diversity is examined on different levels. Most basically, I look at the different countries that have either been nominated or have won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. While 118 countries so far have submitted at least one movie, most of them have never reached the nominated final five. Additionally, inspired by the aforementioned rule of the Academy Awards, I test to what extent winners and nominees might still be linked back to Hollywood, by looking at their distributors and directors. Lastly, I analyze to what extent the films' countries of origin can predict the chance of being nominated or winning, looking at their cultural connectedness with the United States, and their domestic film industry.

By looking at the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, this study adds to the existing body of consecration research in three ways. While the Academy Awards have been the subject of consecration studies before (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010), it has always been limited to major categories. Therefore, the focus has largely been on domestic productions. This has been augmented by the inclusion of national film institutes in the studies, such as the American Film Institute in Allen and Lincoln's (2004) research, and Lampel and Nadavulakere (2009) on the British Film Institute. Studying the Best Foreign Language Film category adds an international aspect to these works. Secondly, by using this category, it is possible to analyze a two-step consecration process. It is known for each country which movie has been submitted since 1956, therefore enabling the possibility to uncover what makes a film go from submission to nomination, and from nomination to winner. So, every serious contender for the award is included in this study. Thirdly, by conducting a multilevel analysis, not only the data is internationally oriented, but I am also able to include characteristics of the many different countries found in the data. This way, it is possible to uncover not only whether or not some countries have a higher chance of winning the award, but, if so, also why this is the case.

## **2. Globalization of cinema**

It has often been argued that today's cultural world is one characterized by globalization (Crane, Kawashima & Kawasaki, 2002). Through international flows of cultural products, people from one side of the world can now get acquainted with the culture of those from the other. However, in many fields, these internationalized flows are hardly in balance. Main centers for cultural

products are found in the United States and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Western Europe, be it for visual arts (Quemin, 2006; Velthuis, 2013), music (Brandellero & Pfeffer, 2011; Moon, Barnett & Lim, 2010), television (Kuipers, 2011), or literature (Sapiro, 2010). In cinema too, a clear center-periphery model has historically been visible, with Hollywood enjoying the strongest position in the global flows of film (Fu & Sim, 2010). Not only does the US produce the second-highest number of films yearly, only surpassed by India (Crane, 2014); it also exports the most movies to the highest amount of countries.

This export of films is increasingly necessary for studios to gain a profit out of their productions, as a large part of the revenue for Hollywood films is gained from foreign box offices (Barthel-Bouchier, 2012). Vice versa, a different pattern is visible, as little non-USA productions hit the screens of American cinemas (Chaudhuri, 2005). American film consumers generally have a low acceptance of foreign productions, as the movie's subjects rarely connect to American culture (Segrave, 2014). Reversely, Lee (2008, p. 121) argues that successful American films are "less culturally specific", and are therefore able to connect more easily to different foreign audiences. This echoes the finding of Verboord and Brandellero (2016) that not only geographical, but also cultural proximity between countries can be important for their ties and cultural flows.

Additionally, Ginsburgh and Weyers (1999) show American productions not only dominate commercially, but also qualitatively. Measuring quality perceived by both consumers and experts, the authors show that both groups consider movies from America superior over the French, Italian, Japanese and British films. Of the (international) best-movie lists collected, more than half of the films is from American descent. While there is more consistency in which foreign movies are included in the lists, they are outweighed by Hollywood films. This thus indicates that not only there is a preference for American films amongst US consumers, but also among international experts. However, the dataset gathered by Ginsburg and Weyers consists of films released between 1950 and 1970, resulting in findings that might not hold water in today's globalized world.

Recently, scholars have found an increasing globalization in film. Chung (2011) shows by using network analysis that countries worldwide have increased in the number of countries with which they are connected through film flows, meaning "many parts of the world enjoy an extended choice of films in terms of diversity of import source countries" (p. 631). Yet, the same study reveals that the global film market is still centralized, with the US, and to a lesser extent France, the UK and Italy, still as the most dominant players.

In studies on global flows of culture, the flows are often measured in terms of chart performance (Verboord & Brandellero, 2016) or other economic success (Moon, Barnett & Lim, 2010). Connolly, Hanretty, Hargreaves Heap and Street (2015) form an exception in global flows studies, by looking at peer-prize-winning television from a globalization perspective. Although their results are limited to European countries, they still show a slight core-periphery model, with the UK, France, and Germany far ahead of the number four; the Netherlands. The success of non-domestic cinema is equally mostly measured through popularity; by the number of movies traveling over the border (Chung, 2011; Crane, 2014; Fu, 2006; Fu & Sim, 2010), or box-office results (Fu, 2012; Fu & Govindaraju, 2010; McDonald, 2009). However, for many foreign movies that make it to America, legitimacy rather than economic factors play a more important role. Especially in the first few decades after the Second World War, foreign films formed a specialized art film market in America (McDonald, 2009).

Therefore, this study will not examine how characteristics of films and their country of origin will benefit box-office success in the US, but their chance of being nominated for, and subsequently win, the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Movie. Rather than focusing on economical outcomes, it shall treat the foreign film as an autonomous pole, focusing on peer recognition (Bourdieu, 1983). As McDonald (2009, p. 361) argues “power is not only achieved by companies contesting the limited economical capital available in this niche but also by competing for the even rarer honours of cultural distinction”.

### **3. Cultural consecration**

Consecrating certain cultural objects is a distinct way of valorizing them. Where valorizing is defined as passing “aesthetic judgement to assign cultural value” (Allen & Lincoln, 2004, p. 873), consecration is a particular valorization technique in which certain cultural products or producers ‘win’ and others ‘lose’ (Childress, Rawlings & Moeran, 2016). In both cases, however, cultural legitimacy is inferred. Bourdieu (1984, p.6), coining the term cultural consecration, argues for a “magical division” between products that deserve extra attention and appreciation, and those that do not. Through cultural valorization, people make a distinction between good works and bad works, while consecration takes it one step further by “separating the great from the merely good” (Allen & Lincoln, 2004, p. 874). By consecrating certain producers or products (the greats) from others (the good), a canon is formed, which shapes how art is seen at that specific time. In recent years, consecration studies have flourished, (partially) fed by the great rise in awards for cultural products and producers (Best, 2009; English, 2005).

Generally speaking, organizations or ‘reputational entrepreneurs’ shape the reputation, and therefore the possible consecration, of cultural products and producers (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Allen & Parsons, 2006). Awards and honors separate the wheat from the chaff by pointing out those products or producers that, in the eyes of those in a judging position, are better than “more or less similar work done by more or less interchangeable people” (Becker, 1982, p. 352). Studies on several fields have analyzed the cultural consecration process; on film (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Cattani, Ferriani & Allison, 2014; Lampel & Nadavulakere, 2009), music (Schmutz, 2005), fine arts (Braden, 2009; 2016), literature (Childress, Rawling & Moeran; Verboord, 2011; 2012), and even wine (Allen & Germov, 2010) and baseball (Allen & Parsons, 2006). While consecration is the subject in each of these studies, not all authors operationalize it in the same manner.

Consecration is linked to what Bourdieu (1983, p. 331-332) calls cultural legitimacy, which he divides into three forms: given by peers (“specific” legitimacy), granted by “dominant fractions of the dominant class and by private tribunals” (“bourgeois” legitimacy), and bestowed by the general public (“popular” legitimacy). The more autonomous a specific cultural field is from the economic field, Bourdieu argues, the more producers from that field care for specific legitimacy over bourgeois and popular recognition. Heteronomous fields, conversely, pay more attention to popular legitimacy, as this is more easily converted to money. While popular legitimacy is occasionally seen as a form of consecration, the process is more often linked to bourgeois and specific legitimacy, as consecration is seen as “a way of lending legitimacy to the field of artistic production” (Schmutz, 2005, p. 1511). By letting peers and critics hand out awards and honors, the field shows it can thrive relatively autonomously from the field of economic production.

This influence of peers and critics on what will (or should) be seen as art gives cultural consecration an institutional nature. Hollywood’s Academy Awards, as well as other award ceremonies serve as “an instrument of status contests among [influential social actors in an organizational field]” (Anand & Watson, 2004, p. 60). According to institutional theory, consecration can influence the field based on the decisions which products get consecrated and which do not. As Anand and Watson argue, one of the results of such consecration is a growing commercial position in the field; markets are penetrated more easily by works that are awarded or nominated than by those that are not. Where DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue for isomorphism as a result, Bourdieu (1993) contends that such field tensions work in hand a new variety in production.

Isomorphism, according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), leads to an increasing similarity between products, professionals, or organizations. One of the reasons for this, the authors argue, is market uncertainty. Success stories will function as models for others, (partially) taking away some uncertainty; if something worked before, chances are it will work again. Franssen and Kuipers (2013) have analyzed the transnational market for literary translations, arguing that indeed, markets in different nations show increasing similarities in the books that get picked for translation. Another consequence put forth by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) is what they call normative pressures, which they link to professionals, rather than organizations. Individuals with similar positions in a field (i.e. managers) get increasingly alike, because of those in charge of selecting them, draw “from the same universities and [filter] on a common set of attributes” (p. 153). While the focus is on individuals, the argument can be easily translated to productions such as film as well; when looking for great production, why not look at countries, directors and actors who have proven their worth in the past?

Bourdieu (1993), on the other hand, argues field struggles, resulting from position-taking of ‘winning’ field actors, do not bring about mimesis, but newfound variety. Instead of mimicking success stories, actors try to bend field rules to overtake or create similar positions. Anand and Watson (2004) show that then new genres such as rock and hip-hop music’s inclusion in the Grammy Awards resulted from struggles ensued because of resistance from “established advocates of pop music” (p. 76). In line with Bourdieu’s theory, supporters of the new genres used existing field resources to ensure innovation within the field, rather than stagnation through imitation.

This however does not subsequently right away alter what gets consecrated. While these field struggles might affect the market supply through innovations, actors in consecrating positions seem to reinforce increasing isomorphism, as they are argued to more easily consecrate what is familiar to them (Cattani, Ferriani & Allison, 2014; Lamont, 2009). Cattani, Ferriani and Allison have found that ‘core professionals’ in Hollywood (those connected to the most other professionals) are more likely to get recognized by peer-based awards than those in the periphery. Subsequently, Rao (1994) has found that, in line with the Matthew effect (Merton, 1968), higher status organizations receive greater rewards than similarly performing lower status organizations. For the Best Foreign Language Film category of the Academy Awards, this firstly indicates a potential preference for those films including personnel known in Hollywood through collaborations (i.e. directors that have directed Hollywood productions), and, secondly, a potential preference for those films including personnel known in Hollywood through previous Academy Award experience.

Consecration processes are thus shown to be dependent on many effects, which can be divided into three general groups: features of the cultural products, characteristics of cultural producers, or attributes of sponsoring organizations (Childress, Rawling & Moeran, 2016). First, regarding features of products, consecration is affected by age (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Schmutz, 2005; Lampel & Nadavulakere, 2009), genre (Kaplan, 2006; Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010; Verboord, 2011) and art form (Braden, 2016). In studies of consecration in cinema, some attention is also paid to the story and plot (Kersten & Verboord, 2013; Levy, 1987; Rossman & Schilke, 2014), although the effect of internal elements is rarely studied in consecration research (Childress, Rawling & Moeran, 2016).

In the consecration of products, not only the products themselves affect possible consecration; the status of the personnel involved impacts it as well. Personal variables of art collectors (Braden, 2016), modern artists (Braden, 2009), authors (Childress, Rawling & Moeran, 2016; Verboord, 2012) have shown to be linked to the likelihood of being consecrated, either contemporaneously or retrospectively. Prior success often leads to a higher probability of consecration, as does being male. For cinema, Allen and Lincoln (2004) have also shown that the status of involved personnel affect the probability of a film getting consecrated. As their results show, especially the status of the director is positively connected to being consecrated years after the film's release. It can therefore be expected that films directed by foreign directors already known in Hollywood have more prospect to get a nomination for Best Foreign Language Film.

Lastly, sponsoring organizations like film agencies (Bielby & Bielby, 1999) or distribution companies (McDonald, 2009), but also similar organizations in visual arts (Velthuis, 2005) literature (Childress, Rawling & Moeran, 2016) or fashion (Godart & Mears, 2009) influence how an artist or art work is recognized. While Childress, Rawling and Moeran (2016) show that high-status publishers positively affect the chance of winning an award, Franssen and Kuipers (2013) argue that a publisher's catalogue affects its field position, indicating the consecration process is a two-way street: organizations affect the product's reputation, which subsequently affects the organization's reputation.

In the consecrating process of foreign films in Hollywood, distributors cannot be overlooked. While their role in domestic productions is often linked to a high extent with the production company of the film, foreign films get distributed by different companies in each country the film is released. Like publishers in the transnational market for literary translations (Franssen & Kuipers, 2013), different distributors will compete for the distributing rights of a movie. As Franssen and Kuipers argue, the back catalogue of publishers "reflect their position in



the field” (p. 69), which, in turn, affects the catalogue as well. Similar results are expected to be found amongst distributing companies

An analysis of the literary field shows that books published by conglomerates have a higher chance to get (partially) consecrated in the form of a Booker prize nomination (Childress, Rawling & Moeran, 2016). Even though books from conglomerates do in the end not win significantly more often than those published by non-conglomerates, they do get nominated more frequently. Their results however do hold just for North American conglomerates. As the distributors for the current study are all US-based, the expectation is to find similar results; those companies part of, or connected to main studios will be more often consecrated, either through a nomination or winning the award. McDonald (2009), in a small-scaled pilot study based on winners of the award, has shown that major labels (or their subsidiaries) are indeed more successful, although independent distributors had their successful period before the nineties.

Most consecration research looks at purely national contexts. While not completely overlooked in consecration research in general (Braden, 2009; 2016; Childress, Rawlings & Moeran, 2016, Quemin, 2006), studies on the consecration of movies have not used nationality of the product or of related personnel (directors, actors, et cetera) as a predictor of recognition. An explanation for this gap is most likely to be found in the way consecration is operationalized in the existing literature. This explanation is threefold. Firstly, professional recognition is often sought in the Academy Awards (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Lee, 2009; Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010), often dealing with categories where the vast majority is a domestic production (Levy, 1987), neglecting professional recognition for films from outside of the USA. Secondly, the American film market is notoriously hard to penetrate for foreign productions (Brunet & Gornostaeva, 2006; Crane, 2014). Very few non-American movies have seen high visitor numbers, making popular recognition in terms of box-office low to non-existent. Thirdly, the studies have generally focused on one single film segment; Hollywood (Allen & Lincoln, 2004), the United Kingdom (Lampel & Nadavulakere, 2009), or films in the English language (Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010).

However, in today’s globalized world, it would be fitting to move beyond a national focus in consecration research. As flows of cultural products are increasingly international (Crane, Kawashima & Kawasaki, 2002), it would be interesting to view the consecrating process and subsequent canonization of works of art from this perspective as well. However, in the field of cinema, there is still a sharp distinction between domestic and foreign products. Institutions such as the Academy Awards have a clear focus on domestic productions, therefore also steering consecration studies in the same direction. Consequently, as various traits have been

proven to influence consecration, such studies have always sampled from a national pool of films, rather than an international one. By focusing on the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, this study aims to do exactly that.

#### **4. The Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film**

Used often as the main institute of professional consecration for Hollywood cinema (Allen & Lincoln, 2004; Lee, 2009; Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010), the Academy Awards are known as “the most recognized prize of the film industry” (Deuchert, Adjamah & Pauly, 2005, p. 159; Levy, 1987). Founded in 1927, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) has awarded exceptional movies since 1929 to “make film a respectable medium” (Baumann, 2001, p. 408). Movies that are nominated for an award are shown to get an economical boost (Deuchert, Adjamah & Pauly, 2005; Rossman & Schilke, 2014), even though actually winning the award does not add much to this effect. However, these findings are based on data from Hollywood productions and focus on the major award categories (such as Best Picture, Best Actor (in both leading and supporting role) and Best Actress (in both leading and supporting role)).

The Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film has been greatly overlooked in academic research (see McDonald, 2009 for an exception). The Academy Awards strongly focus on Hollywood productions, rarely having bestowed an award from one of the main categories to foreign productions. The Best Foreign Language Film category is the yearly exception to this, going each year to a movie majorly shot in a language different than English. For the category, introduced as a competitive one in 1956, each country can submit the film they consider their best, or most Oscar-worthy, of that year. This submission can only be done by an organization consisting of film industry personnel. Of all these submissions, five are then actually nominated by the Foreign Language Film Award Committee. Finally, those members of the AMPAS that have attended exhibition for all nominated productions can vote for the winner.

The Best Foreign Language Film category has been criticized widely. Even though the category sheds a light on something different than Hollywood productions, all the films are piled together in one ‘non-American’ category (Shohat & Stam, 1996), therefore equalizing the differences between the many domestic film industries. Above that, by only giving the opportunity to nominate a single film per country, the rest of that year’s films will not get the recognition they could have potentially deserved. Seeing as nominations are more important than wins for box-office boosts (Deuchert, Adjamah & Pauly, 2005; Rossman & Schilke, 2014), it could indeed be beneficial when the second-best film from a specific country can earn a

nomination too. French director Bertrand Tavernier responded to this arguing “it is as if the Americans are saying to the rest of us, ‘You are entitled to producing one good film a year’” (Corliss, 1985).

With these critiques in mind, the concept of façade diversity (Boli & Elliot, 2008) seems applicable. Boli and Elliot argue that “much of the worldwide celebration and promotion of diversity is the construction of façades that obscure underlying similarity and homogeneity” (p. 542). Indeed, the Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film seems to ‘celebrate’ world cinema, but the category is clearly placed second to domestic productions. Additionally, the AMPAS set the rule that countries can only submit films when “creative control of the motion picture was largely in the hands of citizens or residents of that country” (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, n.d.). ‘Creative control’ is quite fuzzy, as it is not stated what precisely is seen as creative. Therefore, a nominated film could indeed be in a language other than English, not co-produced with the US, but still be linked to Hollywood through other elements of the film (distributor, directors, actors, et cetera), or still be anchored in the West, rather than in world cinema. This study aims to uncover whether Hollywood still holds control over which international movies get consecrated, choosing productions to which it is connected in some way over foreign films unrelated to the industry.

## **5. Data & methods**

The units of analysis for this thesis consist of every film that has been submitted for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Every country is eligible to submit their best movie of the year, which will end up on a shortlist. Eventually, five movies (and thus, five countries) remain in the final nominations, from which one winner is picked during the annual Oscar ceremony. Since the advent of the category in 1956, the number of submitting countries has been quite steadily growing, starting at eight countries, to 89 countries in the last Academy Awards in 2016. The total dataset therefore consists of 2,229 films.

For each film, it is indicated whether they were (1) submitted for, (2) nominated for, or (3) won the Academy Award. Each arguably forms a different step in the consecration process. Submissions already indicate a form of consecration, as these are the films that a country’s official submitting body considered to be the best one of that year. Nominations and wins, subsequently, do not only set apart the film from others from its country, but from others worldwide. Comparable to Childress, Rawling and Moeran’s (2016) data based on the Booker Archives, this study’s dataset contains not only wins and nominees, but all films made eligible by official bodies. In that sense, the dataset is “quite unique in the study of award prize

consecration in that in differentiating between winners and ‘also rans’ all of [the] also rans did in fact also run” (p. 52).

Besides the country of origin of the films, those of the directors are collected as well. While the Academy has set rules regarding the language and country of origin of the actual production, none are arranged for the personnel involved. For example, the first movie to ever win the award, *La Strada* from Italy, included American actors Anthony Quinn and Richard Basehart in main roles. As this might be attractive in terms of familiarity, inclusion of American core personnel (here considered to be director) can influence a film’s chance of success in the awards. In a similar vein, previous success at the Academy Awards, or other direct ties with the Hollywood industry, can have a comparable effect. Therefore, for each of them, previous experience with Hollywood is gathered through the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Directors are coded with a 1 when they have either been nominated for an Academy Awards before, or have worked in Hollywood prior to their submission, and a 0 when this is not the case. If a director has multiple submissions over the years, it is possible that he is coded with a 0 for earlier films and a 1 for later ones.

The last film level variable group comprises variables related to the distributor of the film in the United States. In order to test whether distributors can have an effect on the chance of consecration, the US release date for each movie is gathered<sup>1</sup>. Naturally, distributors cannot affect the odds of winning an award in cases in which movies are released afterwards. Of the 2,229 submitted films, only 465 have been released before the Academy Award ceremony. Others have either been released after the Oscars were handed out (407), or have not seen a theatrical release in the United States at all (1,357). The 465 films released prior to the ceremony were represented by 171 distributing companies, out of 294 in total. For each distributor, information is collected on their form (independent, subsidiary, mini-major, or major distributor) at the time of the movie release. Generally, majors, mini-majors, and their subsidiary distribution companies arguably have a closer connection to the Hollywood industry than independent distributors. Especially subsidiaries are important distributor forms for American releases of foreign films, as majors often establish or buy specialized companies (McDonald, 2009) to still benefit from non-American films, while not having to take direct risk. While many distributors don’t change form, several only become a major distributor later on, or lose their status of a major distributor over time. Similarly, independent labels can become subsidiaries, or vice versa. Information of their form has been collected from distributor’s websites first. In the cases these did not offer the needed information, or did no longer exist, news items, film

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<sup>1</sup> Only theatrical releases are included

reviews and release notes were inquired. Lastly, it is coded if distributors have an office in or around Hollywood, as a physical proximity to the industry center naturally indicated a stronger connection.

Table 1 – Descriptive statistics

	Min	Max	Mean	S.D
<b>Independent level variables</b>				
Results				
Winner	0	1	0.03	0.16
Nominee	0	1	0.11	0.31
Submission	0	1	0.86	0.35
National director	0	1	0.94	0.23
Hollywood ties upon nomination	0	1	0.12	0.32
Gender director	0	1	0.06	0.24
Release				
No US release	0	1	0.61	0.49
Before awards	0	1	0.18	0.39
After awards	0	1	0.21	0.41
Office in Hollywood	0	1	0.48	0.50
Distributor type				
Major	0	1	0.18	0.38
Mini-Major	0	1	0.03	0.16
Subsidiary	0	1	0.21	0.41
Independent	0	1	0.44	0.50
<b>Country level variables</b>				
Cultural distance from USA	0.091	27.84	9.86	5.04
Producer type				
Super producer	0	1	0.06	0.24
Major producer	0	1	0.15	0.35
Medium producer	0	1	0.18	0.39
Minor producer	0	1	0.21	0.41
Mini producer	0	1	0.37	0.48

Because of the international collection of films, the film level variables are supplemented by country level variables. First, the cultural proximity of each country in the dataset to the US is collected. Following Fu and Govindaraju (2010), this is calculated using Geert Hofstede's (2001) cultural index. The Hofstede index scores each country on their individualism, power distance,

uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and is an oft-used index in media flow studies (Verboord & Brandellero, 2016). Secondly, each country's domestic film market is taken into account. This variable is operationalized following Crane (2014), who distinguishes five categories based on the amount of film produced per year: super producers (over 400 films), major producers (101 to 400 films), medium producers (51 to 100 films), minor producers (26 to 50 films) and an unnamed fifth category (less than 26 films). Data on the number of films produced by countries not included in Crane's study is collected through the website of UNESCO. Descriptive statistics for each variable can be found in Table 1.

Because of the nested structure of the data, a multilevel analysis is used. Rather than using a regular OLS regression, often used in consecration studies, the data collected for this study calls for the use of multiple levels. As a result, variables of countries (the higher level) are not overestimated in the analysis, as they would in a regression model that does not take the nested structure of the data into account (Hox, 2002).

## 6. Results

### 6.1. From submission to nominee ( $N = 2,219$ )

On the most basic level, a clear country bias is visible looking at the nominations since 1956. Roughly a third (33.7 percent) of all nominations come from France, Italy, Spain and Germany (including West and East Germany), with Sweden, Russia (including Soviet Union), Japan, Israel, Denmark and Poland adding another 24.2 percent of all nominations. This leaves only 42 percent for the 105 other countries ever to nominate a film for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. All of these thirteen countries also take up high positions looking at the number of movies submitted to the Academy. However, not every country that submitted a high number of movies is equally successful; Hungary, India, the Netherlands and Mexico are also among the top submitting countries, but have a lower submission efficiency than the thirteen countries named before. Besides Mauritania, having submitted a single movie in 2014 that got nominated too, Germany has the highest efficiency with 86 percent of submitted movies being nominated.

Table 2 shows the results of a multilevel analysis with the dependent variable being whether a film got nominated<sup>2</sup>. Model 2 is the null model with only a random intercept testing for variance at the country level. As the random country level intercept in the model is significant, there is indeed a difference between countries in nominations. The intra-class correlation shows that 9.6 percent of variance is explained by country differences. Model 3 adds variables related

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<sup>2</sup> Movies that won are also included in this dummy variable

to the directors of the films to the analysis. The -2 log-likelihood shows that this addition significantly contributes to the model, explaining 2.9% of the individual variance. The director's gender ( $b = -0.028$ ,  $p = 0.340$ ), nor whether the director is from the same country as the submission ( $b = -0.059$ ,  $p = 0.055$ ) significantly affects the probability of a film moving from submission to nomination. However, the chance does increase when a director has previously been connected to Hollywood, either through previous Academy Award nominations (in any category) or through actual Hollywood productions ( $b = 0.157$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Model 4 only includes the form of the distributor of the films. Since not every nomination has been theatrically released in the United States, the amount of films in this model differs from the other models ( $N = 600$ ). Therefore, the change in -2 log-likelihood, as well as the individual variance cannot be compared. In this model, films released by a distributor that is a subsidiary of a larger company have a significantly higher chance of being nominated than films from independent distributors ( $b = 0.144$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Productions distributed by majors are however most likely to move from submission to nomination ( $b = 0.208$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Even though not all major labels and subsidiaries are located in or around Hollywood, this already points towards a bias for films that are connected to larger companies.

With Model 5, two extra distributor variables are entered; whether a film has been released prior to the awards, and whether the distributor has an office in or around Hollywood. Films released before the award have a significantly smaller chance of being nominated ( $b = -0.166$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This can possibly be explained by the fact that distributors wait with releasing films they expect to have a chance of being nominated, so they can fully profit from the exposure. Since the foreign movie market is characterized by uncertainty, even more so than the market for domestic cinema, distributors can use a nomination to already gain a connection to consumers. Secondly, having a distributor with an office in or around Hollywood has a significantly positive effect on nomination. When a distributor has an office in or around Hollywood, the connection to the industry is obviously stronger than for distributors located outside the area (i.e. in New York or Atlanta). This result does therefore indicate that it indeed pays off for a film to have a Hollywood connection.

Model 5 additionally shows that the effects found in Model 4 no longer hold up when the releasing of the movie is taken into account. Model 4 theoretically indicates that films from a major label have the highest chance of being nominated, but by not adding the release date variable, films that have been released after the nomination are now taken into account as well. The disappearance of the significant effect in this sense might be explained by the fact that majors (either directly or through their subsidiaries) have a strong negotiating position in gaining

the distribution rights for a nominated film. It is likely that nominated films that have not yet been released theatrically will in the end be distributed, as the Academy Award nomination can serve as 'free' marketing.

The most striking result of Model 4 and 5 is however the disappearance of a significant country-level variance. While Model 3 still showed a significant difference between countries in the variance of nominations, this disappears with the addition of distributor variables. Distributors thus do affect the likelihood of being nominated, either by distributing the film in the first place, or when they have an office in or around Hollywood, but this does not differ per country of submission. Therefore, from Model 4 onwards, the results no longer show a multilevel structure.

Model 6 combines the variables of Model 3 and 5, finding little change in the effects. Although less significant and slightly weaker, directors' previous ties to Hollywood still positively affect the chance of being nominated for the award ( $b = 0.100$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ). Similarly, it remains significantly positive for a movie to be released before the actual awards and have a distributor that is located in or around Hollywood. What this model thus shows is that there indeed seems to be a nominating bias towards films with a connection to Hollywood, either through their distributor or through their director.

Lastly, Model 7 adds the country-level variables to the analysis. Firstly, cultural distance from the United States is found to not have a significant effect on the likelihood of being nominated. This possibly has to do with the fact that some of the countries closest to the US (Australia, the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland) are so close because of their shared language. However, the fact that English is the main language in these countries, and movies therefore are often also in English, implies that they do not submit many films. Additionally, those that do get submitted are possibly not the best films from the countries, only the best non-English films. Other countries will have this issue less, as most of their films, including therefore their best ones, will be in a language different than English. However, while conceivable, this theory would not explain the lack of nominations for Canada, whose French-language films have been submitted numerous times.

The second country characteristic in Model 7 looks at the number of films that gets produced annually, based on Crane (2014). Compared to the reference category, the number of films produced by a country does not significantly affect the chance of a nomination. Only films from minor producing countries have a significantly higher chance ( $b = 0.145$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ). However, since the country level variance is still insignificant, this result should be taken with caution.



In conclusion, films can thrive from being connected to Hollywood when they want to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Both a connection through the director and through the distributor have a positive effect on moving from submission to the final five nominations. While fairly diverse in the total amount of countries that get submitted in the end (although there is somewhat of a bias visible there as well), digging slightly deeper shows that the Academy Award still looks for its nominees close to home; in the West, but moreover, close to Hollywood.

### *6.2. From nominee to winner (N = 306)*

Equal to the division of nominees, France, Italy and Spain form the top three of awarded countries, accounting for nearly forty percent of all winners. Sweden, Denmark, Russia (including Soviet Union) and Germany (including East and West Germany) again follow, accounting for another 21 percent, leaving only 39 percent for the other 108 countries. In actuality, only 25 countries have ever received the Best Foreign Language Oscar, meaning the leftover 39 percent is accounted for by sixteen countries. While scoring high on nominations, Poland, Japan and Israel are among the lower regions in the winners list (one, one and zero wins, respectively). Italy and France are also amongst the most efficient countries, having respectively won 18.3 and 14.8 percent of all submissions. Only Ivory Coast, with fifty percent (one out of two), ranks higher. Spain, although having won the award multiple times, positions lower with 6.8 percent of submissions turned into winning movies. Looking at nominated movies that turned into winning ones, Ivory Coast and Bosnia both top the list by both having one film nominated, which then also won. Of the top countries, Italy ranks highest with 39.3 percent.

Table 3 shows the results of a multilevel analysis with the dependent variable being whether a nominated film won. Model 2 is the null model with only a random intercept testing for variance at the country level. As the variance on the country level is insignificant, this points towards the fact that there is no significant difference in countries winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Note here that only the countries that have actually been nominated are included in the analysis. As the analysis before showed that there is a country difference for being nominated in the first models, this means that there would also be a significant difference when all submitted films would have been still included in the analysis. Model 3, showing the effect of director variables, shows similar results to Model 3 in Table 2. The -2 log-likelihood shows that the addition of the variables is significant, explaining an additional 1.3 percent of individual variance. Again, whether a director is from the nominated country does not significantly contribute to the chance of winning ( $b = -0.040$ ,  $p = 0.636$ ),

Table 2 – Results of multilevel linear regression modelling for submission to nomination

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
<b>Individual-level fixed effects</b>														
Intercept	0.138**	0.007	0.106**	0.013	0.149**	0.032	0.218**	0.028	0.110**	0.037	0.117	0.083	0.11	0.094
National director					-0.059	0.031					-0.019	0.08	-0.000	0.083
Hollywood ties upon nomination					0.157**	0.022					0.100*	0.048	0.096*	0.047
Gender of director					-0.028	0.029					-0.057	0.083	-0.058	0.085
<i>Distributor type</i>														
Major							0.208**	0.049	0.091	0.058	0.085	0.058	0.083	0.050
Mini-major							0.171	0.108	0.066	0.108	0.061	0.108	0.069	0.113
Subsidiary							0.144**	0.046	0.074	0.051	0.055	0.051	0.024	0.048
Independent							ref. cat.		ref. cat.		ref. cat.		ref. cat.	
Film released before Awards									-0.166**	0.039	-0.165**	0.039	-0.170**	0.039
Office in Hollywood									0.149**	0.046	0.139**	0.046	0.133**	0.015
<b>Country-level fixed effects</b>														
Cultural distance from USA													-0.007	0.002
<i>Producer type</i>														
Super producer													0.068	0.087
Major producer													0.1	0.061
Medium producer													-0.008	0.060
Minor producer													0.145*	0.061
Mini producer													ref. cat.	

\* p < 0.05

\*\* p < 0.01

(Continued)

Table 2 cont.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Variance individual level	0.119**	0.004	0.103**	0.003	0.100**	0.003	0.201**	0.012	0.195**	0.012	0.193**	0.012	0.190**	0.012
Variance country level			0.011**	0.002	0.009**	0.002	0.007	0.004	0.005	0.004	0.005	0.004	0.001	0.003
-2 log-likelihood	1571.6		1373.6		1287.8		757.5		673.2		658.0		602.8	

\* p &lt; 0.05

\*\* p &lt; 0.01

Table 3 – Results of multilevel linear regression modelling for nomination to win

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
<b>Individual-level fixed effects</b>														
Intercept	0.199**	0.023	0.193**	0.025	0.202*	0.083	0.299**	0.054	0.317**	0.068	0.241	0.136	0.225	0.18
National director					-0.040	0.084					0.038	0.128	0.06	0.14
Hollywood ties upon nomination					0.101*	0.051					0.158*	0.071	0.161*	0.07
Gender of director					-0.035	0.113					-0.045	0.145	-0.049	0.15
<i>Distributor type</i>														
Major							-0.005	0.077	-0.092	0.091	-0.122	0.092	-0.096	0.09
Mini-major							-0.078	0.161	-0.17	0.163	-0.166	0.162	-0.266	0.17
Subsidiary							0.15	0.077	-0.229**	0.085	-0.281**	0.087	-0.274**	0.09
Independent							ref. cat.		ref. cat.		ref. cat.		ref. cat.	
Film released before Awards									-0.122	0.071	-0.101	0.071	-0.121	0.07
Office in Hollywood									0.125	0.08	0.142	0.08	0.091	0.08

\* p &lt; 0.05

\*\* p &lt; 0.01

(Continued)

Table 3 cont.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	
<b>Country-level fixed effects</b>															
Cultural distance from USA														-0.008	0.01
Producer type															
Super producer														-0.076	0.16
Major producer														0.137	0.12
Medium producer														0.074	0.12
Minor producer														0.149	0.12
Mini producer														ref. cat.	
<b>Random effects</b>															
Variance individual level	0.160**	0.013	0.157**	0.013	0.155**	0.013	0.181**	0.02	0.176**	0.021	0.170**	0.02	0.169**	0.02	
Variance country level			0.002	0.004	0.002	0.004	0.009	0.01	0.008	0.011	0.009	0.012	0.004	0.00	
-2 log-likelihood	306.9		306.4		296.8		227.8		206.0		195.9		178.6		

\* p &lt; 0.05

\*\* p &lt; 0.01

nor does the director's gender ( $b = -0.035$ ,  $p = 0.753$ ). Previous ties to Hollywood, however, do again matter ( $b = 0.101$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ), adding to the positive effect it already has on moving from submission to nomination.

Model 4 looks again separately at the effect of distributor type. Unlike the move from submission to nomination, it does not significantly affect the chance of a nominee to actually win the award. Nominees from all four types of distributors (major, mini-major, subsidiary or independent) have a somewhat equal chance of winning, when no other variables are included in the model. Model 5 adds the other two distributor variables to the analysis, adding an effect of actually being released before the awards, and having a distributor with a Hollywood office. While both of these variables are not significant ( $b = -0.122$ ,  $p = 0.085$ ;  $b = 0.125$ ,  $p = 0.118$ ), they do affect the significance of distributor type. Whereas there is no significant difference between the chance of winning for major-distributed or mini-major-distributed films and independent-distributed films (reference category), movies that are distributed by subsidiaries have a significantly smaller chance of bringing home the award ( $b = -0.299$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). In moving from submission to nomination, being distributed by a subsidiary still had a positive effect, but among the nominated five, these distributors more often end up 'losing'. This means that, while major distributors often distribute their foreign films through specialized daughter companies, non-domestic productions that get distributed by the actual 'main' company have a higher chance of winning. A potential explanation for this is that major (and mini-major) distributors use their subsidiaries to 'feed' the foreign film market, while distributing the best international movies themselves. Additionally, independent distributors also have a higher chance of winning than subsidiaries, meaning that the Academy mainly praises those foreign language films released by either the biggest or smallest distributors.

This effect remains in Model 6, which combines the variables of Model 3 and 5. Again, the Hollywood ties of a director are significantly positive ( $b = 0.158$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ) and being distributed by a subsidiary distributor offers a lower chance of winning than being distributed by an independent one ( $b = -0.281$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Like in the previous models, none of the other variables significantly affect the likelihood of winning the award. Having ties to Hollywood still remains important to win (as it did for getting nominated), but now only through the director; distributors with a Hollywood connection no longer change the probability of winning.

Adding country characteristics in Model 7, unsurprisingly, also does not show any significant effects on winning. As already shown in the variance, there is no significant difference between countries in the chance to win. While there was a slight increase in probability for minor producing countries to be nominated, there is no difference in winning

between the five producer categories. Secondly, like in the previous analysis, countries that are culturally closer to the United States do not win the award more often than countries with less cultural proximity.

In the end, moving from nominee to winner is less dependent on the chosen variables than moving from submission to nominee. While a tie to Hollywood is still relevant, it is only in the form of ties of directors, no longer distributors. It also no longer matters to have the film released before the awards. However, while there was no significant effect of distributor type in the first analysis, the second showed that being distributed by a subsidiary decreases the chance of winning significantly. Predicting which movie will eventually be awarded the Best Foreign Language Film Oscar by Academy voters, is thus more difficult than anticipating on which films will receive a nomination from the nominating committee.

## **7. Conclusion and discussion**

This study has addressed the diversity within the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film to uncover whether it pays off to have a connection to either Hollywood or, more generally, the United States. To find this connection, two multi-level analysis of all submissions to the award category has been conducted, with a dataset of 2,219 films, spread out over 118 different countries. France and Italy, historically known as important film countries (Baumann, 2001) unsurprisingly have the most submissions, nominations and wins, followed by Spain, Sweden and Denmark. This shows that the countries that have the strongest position in the international movie network (Chung, 2011), also have the highest chance of being consecrated. Other countries such as Japan, also have a high number of submitted and nominated films, but have won nearly never. Based on simple descriptive statistics, there thus does seem to be somewhat of a Western bias in the award category. The first multi-level analysis revealed that to move from submission to nomination, it does indeed favors to be connected to Hollywood, either through ties of the director or the distributor. Directors that have previously been nominated for any Academy Award, or have worked on Hollywood productions before their current nomination, have higher odds of ending up among the final five. Similarly, if the movie has been released before the actual awards, which has a negative effect on its own, films that are released by distributors with an office in or near Hollywood have an extra advantage. A more general connection with the United States, operationalized through cultural distance, does not significantly affect the chance to be nominated, nor does the amount of films a country produces. Additionally, the multi-level analysis has shown that, when adding distributor variables, there is no longer a significant difference between countries in their chance of

nomination, even though there initially seems to be a large disparity in the number of nominations per submitting country.

The second analysis, including only the nominated films and examining what affects their chance of winning, shows yet again that there is no difference in countries. This would mean that, based on the analysis of all the countries that have ever been nominated, each one has a similar chance of winning the award. However, looking at other variables, it again shows that a Hollywood connection forms an advantage. On top of the positive effect it had on getting nominated, being directed by a director with previous ties to Hollywood increases the chance of a film to win the award. The other variable looking at the connection with Hollywood, the location of the distributor, does not have a significant effect for nominees. When nominated, it does form a disadvantage to be distributed by a subsidiary distributor. Other forms (majors, mini-majors and independents) do not significantly differ in their likelihood to win. Similarly, and just like in the first analysis, country variables also do not significantly affect this probability.

This study thus has shown that, in the underdog category of Best Foreign Language Film, it pays off the most to be the least of the underdogs. Being connected to Hollywood firstly helps in the move from submission to nomination in two ways, and secondly helps to actually win the award through the film's director. With this finding, I have shown that the Academy's rule that a film cannot be too connected to the United States or Hollywood is in many cases not followed when defining this connection more indirectly. This indicates that isomorphism might indeed be applicable regarding the Oscar category, showing signs of normative pressure, as it seems that the same directors and distributors keep getting nominated and awarded. Additionally, I have revealed that being released before the awards puts films in a disadvantaged position regarding nominations. However, this might not have much to do with the preference of Academy voters, but more with distributors wanting to wait with releasing their movie until they can profit from the nomination from a marketing point of view.

Yet, the study does have some shortcomings. In the end, the scope of the research is quite small, as many other relevant variables could have been included. For example, future research could include such elements as storylines or other film-intrinsic characteristics such as the location of the story. This could show whether Academy members look at similar characteristics in foreign and domestic movies when casting their votes, adding another layer to the Hollywood connection. Also, Hollywood ties of other included personnel such as actors and producers should be taken into account. As collaborations influence independent accomplishment (Rossman, Esparza & Bonacich, 2010), it might be that analyzing the effect of directors in a vacuum obscures the complete effect personnel can have. In addition, by looking

at cultural distance alone, this study has excluded potentially relevant country characteristics. For example, future research could add more variables indicating a connection to the United States on, for example, an economic or geographical level, as this has shown to influence cultural flows (Verboord & Brandellero, 2016). Lastly, this study has completely disregarded the year in which the films were released and submitted. It could be argued that the films are nested partially both in year and in country, meaning cross-classified models in the multilevel analysis would offer better predictions. However, because most variables are static (the Hofstede-index is not vulnerable to changes in time, and the number of productions per country taken largely from Crane (2014) is the most reliable measurement, considering few sources on yearly film productions per country are available), I have chosen to keep the submission year out of the analysis. Future research could choose to include it, opening up the way to a more time-dependent analysis.



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