

[연구논문]

## Foreign Influences on American Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, there was—as we all know—an outpouring of sympathy in Europe and elsewhere for the United States. But since the beginning of 2002, this international affection has been replaced by resentment at America’s political “arrogance,” its overwhelming economic and military power, and the Bush administration’s apparent “unilateralist” foreign policy.

Americans like to think that “they” hate “us” because of who we are, rather than what we do. Yet neither formulation may explain the resurgence of global anti-Americanism. Dislike for the United States stems also from what foreigners consider America’s cultural “hegemony.” America’s mass culture, in particular, inspires ambivalence, anger, and sometimes violent reactions, not just in the Middle East but all over the world.

There is no doubt that America often seems to be the elephant in everyone’s living room. But the discomfort with America’s political,

economic, military, and cultural dominance is not new. In 1901, the British writer William Stead published a book called, ominously, *The Americanization of the World*.<sup>1)</sup> The title captured a set of apprehensions—about the disappearance of national languages and traditions, the decline of intellectual and artistic standards, and the obliteration of a country’s unique “identity” under the weight of American habits and states of mind—that persists until today.

When people in other countries worried in the past, as they do in the present, about the international impact of American culture, they were not thinking of America’s literature, painting, or ballet. “Americanization” has always meant the worldwide invasion of American movies, jazz, rock and roll, mass circulation magazines, best-selling books, advertising, comic strips, theme parks, shopping malls, fast food, television programs, and now the Internet. This is, in the eyes of many foreigners, a culture created not for patricians but for the common folk. Indeed, it inspired a revolution in the way we conceive of culture.

More recently, globalization has become the main enemy for academics, journalists, and political activists who loathe what they see as the trend toward cultural uniformity. Still, they typically regard global culture and American culture as synonymous. And they continue to insist that Hollywood, McDonald’s, and Disneyland are eradicating regional and local eccentricities—disseminating images and subliminal messages so beguiling as to drown out the competing voices in other lands.

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1) Peter Duignan and L.H.Gann, *The Rebirth of the West: The Americanization of the Democratic World, 1945-1958* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 411.

Despite these allegations, the cultural relationship between the United States and the world over the past 100 years has never been one-sided. On the contrary, the United States was, and continues to be, as much a consumer of foreign intellectual and artistic influences as it has been a shaper of the world's entertainment and tastes. What I want to emphasize, therefore, is how *reciprocal* America's cultural connections with other countries really are.

That is not an argument with which many foreigners (or even many Americans) would readily agree. The clichés about American's cultural "imperialism" make it difficult for most people to recognize that modern global culture is hardly a monolithic entity foisted on the world by the American media. Neither is it easy for critics of Microsoft or Time Warner to acknowledge that the conception of a harmonious and distinctively American culture—encircling the globe, implanting its values in foreign minds—has always been a myth.

Nevertheless, the United States has been a recipient as much as an exporter of global culture. Indeed, immigrants from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and increasingly the Middle East, as well as African-Americans and the thousands of refugee scholars and artists who fled Hitler in the 1930s, have played a crucial role in the development of American science, literature, movies, music, painting, architecture, fashion, and food. In fact, it was Hitler's destruction of the German and Central European intellectual community, a community composed largely of Jews, that accounted for the shift in the cultural balance of power from Europe to the United States during and after World War II.

It is precisely these foreign influences that have made America's

culture so popular for so long in so many places. American culture spread throughout the world because it has habitually drawn on foreign styles and ideas. Americans have then reassembled and repackaged the cultural products they received from abroad, and retransmitted them to the rest of the planet. In effect, Americans have specialized in selling the fantasies and folklore of other people back to them. This is why a global mass culture has come to be identified, however simplistically, with the United States.

There are other reasons, of course, for the international popularity of American culture. Certainly, the ability of America's media conglomerates to control the production and distribution of their products has been a major stimulus for the worldwide spread of American entertainment.

Moreover, the emergence of English<sup>2)</sup> as a global language has been essential to the acceptance of American culture. One billion people on the planet, at the beginning of the 21st century, speak some form of English. People who have learned English as a foreign language now outnumber those who are native speakers.

Yet more significant than its diffusion around the world is the effectiveness of English (unlike German, Russian, Chinese, or even French and Italian) as a language of mass communications. Its simpler structure and grammar along with its tendency to use shorter, less abstract words and more concise sentences are all advantageous for the composers of song lyrics, ad slogans, cartoon captions, newspaper headlines, and movie and TV dialogue. English is thus a language

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2) Peter Lev, *The Euro-American Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 75.

exceptionally well-suited to the demands of American mass culture.

Another factor contributing to the globalization<sup>3)</sup> of American culture is the size of the American audience. From the 1920s on, America's artists and entertainers have benefited from a huge domestic market. This market has provided an economic cushion for the producers of American mass culture, a cushion unavailable in many other countries. The possibility that American filmmakers and television executives could retrieve most of their production costs and make a profit within the borders of the United States in turn encouraged them to spend more money on stars, sets, special effects, location-shooting, and merchandising—the very ingredients that attract international audiences as well.

But the power of American capitalism, the worldwide familiarity with English, and the economic advantages of a large home market do not by themselves account for America's cultural ascendancy. American entertainment has always been more cosmopolitan than “imperialistic.” It is this cosmopolitanism that helped make America's mass culture<sup>4)</sup> a global phenomenon.

In short, the familiar artifacts of American culture may not be all that “American.” Americans, after all, did not invent fast food, amusement parks, shopping malls, or the movies. Before the Big Mac, there were fish-and-chips, worst stands, and pizzas. Before Disneyland there was Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens (which Walt Disney used as a

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3) William Read, *America's Mass Media Merchants* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 178.

4) Miles Orvell, “Understanding Disneyland: American Mass Culture and the European Gaze,” in Kroes et al., eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions*, 249-51.

prototype for his first theme park in Anaheim, a model later re-exported to Tokyo<sup>5)</sup> and Paris). Before American-style malls there were pedestrian arcades in most European cities and covered bazaars in cities and towns throughout the Middle East and Asia. Indeed, one of the first European-style shopping areas in the United States was constructed in Kansas City in the 1920s; it was called “The Plaza” because the developer admired the architecture of Seville. The first indoor American malls were designed after World War II by an Austrian émigré, Victor Gruen,<sup>6)</sup> who wanted to create planned shopping and residential communities modeled on Vienna’s famous Ringstrasse. And in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until World War I, France and Italy dominated the international (as well as the American) film market.

Nor can the roots of American popular culture be traced only to native entertainers like P.T. Barnum or Buffalo Bill. Its origins lay as well in the European modernist assault, in the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, music, painting, and architecture—particularly in the modernists’ refusal to honor the traditional boundaries between high and low culture. Modernism in the arts was improvisational, eclectic, and irreverent. These traits have also been characteristic of, but not peculiar to, mass culture.

The hallmark of 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture was its insistence on defending the purity of literature, classical music, and representational painting against the intrusions of folklore and popular amusements. No one

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5) James Sterngold, “Tokyo’s Magic Kingdom Outshines Its Role Model,” *New York Times* (March 7, 1994), C7.

6) James Twitchell, *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 259.

confused Tolstoy with dime novels, opera with Wild West Shows, the Louvre with Coney Island. High culture was supposed to be educational, contemplative and uplifting—a way of preserving the best in human “civilization.”

These beliefs didn't mean that a Dickens never indulged in melodrama or that Brahms disdained the use of popular songs. Nor did Chinese or Japanese authors and painters refuse to draw on oral or folkloric traditions. But the 19<sup>th</sup>-century barriers between high and low culture were resolutely, if imperfectly, maintained.

The artists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century shattered what seemed to them the artificial demarcation between different cultural forms. They also questioned the notion that culture was primarily a means of intellectual or moral improvement. They did so by valuing style and craftsmanship over philosophy, religion, or ideology. Hence, they deliberately called attention to language in their novels, to optics in their paintings, to the materials in and function of their architecture, to the structure of music instead of its melodies.

And they wanted to shock their audiences. Which they succeeded in doing. Modern painting and literature—with its emphasis on visually distorted nudes, overt sexuality, and meditations on violence—was attacked for being degrading and obscene, and for appealing to the baser instincts of humanity in much the same way that critics would later denounce the vulgarity of popular culture.

Although modernism assaulted the conventions of 19<sup>th</sup> century high culture in Europe and Asia, it inadvertently accelerated the growth of mass culture in the United States. Indeed, Americans were already receptive to the blurring of cultural boundaries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

symphony orchestras in the United States often included band music in their programs, while opera singers were asked to perform both Mozart and Stephen Foster,

So, for Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Surrealism, with its dreamlike associations, easily lent itself to the wordplay and psychological symbolism of advertising, cartoons, and theme parks. Dadaism ridiculed the snobbery of elite cultural institutions, and reinforced instead an already-existing appetite (especially among the immigrant audiences in America) for “low-class,” disreputable, movies and vaudeville<sup>7)</sup> shows. Stravinsky’s experiments with atonal (and thus unconventional and unmelodic) music validated the rhythmic innovations of jazz.<sup>8)</sup> Writers like Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, detesting the rhetorical embellishments of 19<sup>th</sup>-century prose and fascinated by the stylistic innovations of Joyce and Proust (among other European masters), invented a terse and hard-boiled language, devoted to reproducing as authentically as possible the elemental qualities of personal experience. This laconic style became a model for modern journalism, detective fiction, and movie dialogue.

All of these trends provided the foundations for a genuinely new culture. But the new culture turned out to be neither modernist nor European. Instead, America transformed what was still an avant-garde and somewhat parochial project, appealing largely to the young and

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7) Martin Laforse and James Drake, *Popular Culture and American Life: Selected Topics in the Study of American Popular Culture* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), 128.

8) Berndt Ostendorf, “Ralph Waldo Ellison: Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz,” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O’Meally (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 112-13.



the rebellious in Western society, into a global enterprise.

This cultural metamorphosis is striking in literature. Hemingway, Dos Passos, and William Faulkner may have been captivated in the 1920s by European modernism. But the raw power of their prose and their ability to dramatize the sensation of living in a world of absurdity in turn became enormously popular with Italian novelists and literary critics in the 1930s who were disgusted with Mussolini's bombast, and with writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus after World War II who wanted to puncture the bourgeois stuffiness of French life. Thus, American literature, initially molded by European ideas, became a template for world literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The propensity of Americans to borrow and alter modernist ideas, and transform them into a global culture, is even more visible in the commercial uses of modern architecture. The European Bauhaus movement<sup>9)</sup>—intended in the 1920s as a socialist experiment in working-class housing—eventually provided the theories and techniques for the construction of commercial skyscrapers and vacation homes in the United States. But these now-“Americanized” architectural ideas were then sent back to Europe after World War II as a model for the reconstruction of bombed-out cities like Rotterdam, Cologne, and Frankfurt. Thus, the United States converted what had once been a distinctive, if localized, rebellion by Dutch and German architects into a generic “international style.” Similarly, the American abstract expressionists of the 1940s were heavily influenced by European

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9) Margret Kentgens-Craig, *The Bauhaus and America: First Contacts, 1919-1936* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), x vi.

refugee<sup>10)</sup> painters, sculptors, and art dealers, yet their work became—at least for a time—the world’s most dominant form of art.

But it is in popular culture that America’s embrace and reshaping of foreign influences can best be seen. The American audience is not only large; because of the influx of immigrants and refugees, it is also international in its complexion. The heterogeneity of America’s population—its regional, ethnic, religious, and racial diversity—forced the media, from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to experiment with messages, images, and story lines that had a broad multicultural appeal. The Hollywood studios, the mass-circulation magazines, and the television networks had to learn how to speak to a variety of groups and classes at home. This has given them the techniques to captivate an equally diverse audience abroad. The American domestic market has, in essence, been a laboratory, a place to develop cultural products that could then be adapted to the world market.

One important way that the American media succeeded in transcending internal social divisions, national borders, and language barriers was by mixing up cultural styles. American musicians and composers have followed the example of modernist artists like Picasso and Braque by intermingling elements from high and low culture, combining the sacred and the profane. Aaron Copland, George Gershwin,<sup>11)</sup> and Leonard Bernstein incorporated folk melodies, religious hymns, blues and gospel songs, and jazz into their symphonies, concertos, operas, and ballets. Bernstein’s *West Side Story*,

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10) Barbara Haskell, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-1950* (New York: Norton, 1999), 327.

11) William Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), 79.

for instance, transformed Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into a saga of juvenile gang warfare on the streets of New York, just as Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe converted Shaw's *Pygmalion* into *My Fair Lady*—perhaps the most commercially successful, and certainly the wittiest, of all American musical comedies. Similarly, Walt Disney drew on European folk tales as well as on classical music in his cartoons (especially in *Fantasia*), giving his films an “international” veneer. Even an art as quintessentially American as jazz evolved during the 20<sup>th</sup> century into an amalgam<sup>12)</sup> of African, Caribbean, Latin American, and modernist European music. It is this blending of forms in America's mass culture that has enhanced its appeal to multi-ethnic domestic and international audiences by reflecting their varied experiences and tastes.

Nowhere are these foreign influences more unmistakable than in the American movie industry. If movies have been the most important source both of art and entertainment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Hollywood—for better or worse—became the cultural capital of the modern world. But it was never an exclusively American capital. Like past cultural centers—Florence, Paris, Vienna, Berlin—Hollywood has functioned as an international community, built by immigrant entrepreneurs, and drawing on the talents of actors, directors, writers, cinematographers, editors, costume and set designers, from all over the world.<sup>13)</sup> For example, most of the film scores for the Hollywood

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12) Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 35.

13) Tino Balio, “The Art Film Market in the New Hollywood,” in *Hollywood and Europe: Economics, Culture, National Identity, 1945-95*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Steven Ricci (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 65.

movies of the 1930s and 1940s were composed by refugees from Europe and the Soviet Union: men like Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklos Rozsa, Dimiti Tiomkin, and Max Steiner (who was responsible for the scores of both *Gone with the Wind* and *Casablanca*). And one of first American movie stars, after all, was Charlie Chaplin, whose comic skills were honed in British music halls.

Moreover, during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American moviemakers thought of themselves as acolytes, entranced by the superior works of foreign directors. In the 1920s, few American directors could gain admittance to a European pantheon that included Sergei Eisenstein, F.W. Murnau, G.W. Papst, Fritz Lang, and Carl Dreyer. The postwar years, from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, were once again a golden age of filmmaking in Britain, Sweden, France, Italy, Japan,<sup>14</sup>) and India. An extraordinary generation of foreign directors—Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, and Satyajit Ray—became the world’s most celebrated *auteurs*.

Of course, the French directors learned much of their craft by watching and analyzing Hollywood Westerns and gangster movies, copying the American tough-guy style in films like Godard’s *Breathless* and Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player*. Nevertheless, it is one of the paradoxes of the postwar European and Asian cinema that its greatest success was in spawning American imitations—another

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14) Koichi Iwabuchi, “From Western Gaze to Global Gaze: Japanese Cultural Presence in Asia,” in *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*, ed. Diana Crane, Nobuko Kawashima, and Ken’ichi Kawasaki (New York: Routledge, 2002), 268.

example of how these cultural transmissions and influences resemble a hall of mirrors.

After the release in 1967 of *Bonnie and Clyde* (originally to have been directed by Truffaut or Godard), the newest geniuses—Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese,<sup>15)</sup> Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg, Woody Allen<sup>16)</sup>—were American. The Americans may have owed their improvisational methods, their quick cuts and disorienting camera shots, their blend of comedy and violence, their autobiographical preoccupations, and their ambiguous or distinctly unhappy endings largely to Italian neo-Realism and the French New Wave. But who in any country needed to see another *La Dolce Vita* when you could now enjoy *Nashville*? Why try to decipher *Jules and Jim* or *L'Avventura* when you could savor *Annie Hall* or *The Godfather*? Wasn't it conceivable that *The Seven Samurai* might not be as powerful or as disturbing a movie as *The Wild Bunch*?

It turned out that foreign filmmakers had been too influential for their own good. The Americans used the techniques they absorbed from the European and Asian *auteurs* to revolutionize the American cinema, so that after 1960s and 1970s it became harder for any other continent's film industry to match the worldwide popularity of American movies. Indeed, many of the most intriguing and idiosyncratic American films of the past 15 years—*The Usual Suspects*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Fargo*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Hours*, *Lost in Translation*—are indebted to the “renaissance” in American filmmaking that took

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15) Krin Grabard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 269.

16) Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *A World in Chaos: Crisis and the Rise of Postmodern Cinema* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 141.

place 20 years earlier.

Still, American directors in every era have emulated foreign artists and filmmakers by paying close attention to the formal qualities of a movie, and to the need to tell a story visually. Early 20<sup>th</sup>-century European painters wanted their viewers to recognize that they were looking at lines and color on a canvass rather than at a reproduction of the natural world. Similarly, many American films—from the multiple narrators in *Citizen Kane*, to the split screen portrait of how two lovers imagine their relationship in *Annie Hall*, to the flashbacks and flash-forwards in *Pulp Fiction*, to the roses blooming from the navel of Kevin Spacey's fantasy dream girl in *American Beauty*—deliberately remind the audience that it is watching a carefully-crafted, highly stylized movie, not a play or a photographed version of reality. Thus, American filmmakers (in the movies as well as on MTV) have been willing to use the most sophisticated techniques of editing and camera work, much of it inspired by foreign directors, to create a modernist collage of images that captures the speed and seductiveness of life in the contemporary world.

Hollywood's addiction to modernist *visual* pyrotechnics is particularly evident in the *nonverbal* style of many of its contemporary performers. The tendency to mumble was not always in vogue. In the 1930s and 1940s, the sound and meaning of words were important not only in movies but also on records and the radio. Even though some homegrown stars, like John Wayne and Gary Cooper, were famously terse, audiences could at least hear and understand what they were saying. But the centrality of language in the films of the 1930s led more often to a dependence in Hollywood on British actors (like

Cary Grant) or on Americans who sounded vaguely British (like Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis). It is illustrative of how important foreign (especially British) talent was to Hollywood that the two most famous Southern belles in American fiction and drama—Scarlett O’Hara and Blanche DuBois—were both played in the movies by Vivien Leigh.

Indeed, foreign voices of all types were in great demand. This is, in part, why Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo were such charismatic stars in the 1930s. And why—in one of the most famous Hollywood films, *Casablanca*—every actor except for Humphrey Bogart and Dooley Wilson (who played Sam the piano player) was an émigré or a refugee from Europe, including the Hungarian director Michael Curtiz.

But the verbal eloquence of pre-World War II acting, in the movies and the theater, disappeared after 1945. After Marlon Brando’s revolutionary performance<sup>17)</sup> in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, on stage in 1947 and on screen in 1951, the model of American acting became a brooding, almost inarticulate, introspectiveness that one doesn’t find in the glib and clever heroes or heroines of the screwball comedies and gangster films of the 1930s.

Brando was trained in the Method, an acting technique originally developed in Stanislavsky’s<sup>18)</sup> Moscow Art theater in pre-revolutionary Russia, and then imported to New York by the members of the Group Theater during the 1930s. Where British actors, trained in Shakespeare,

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17) Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2000), 102.

18) Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor* (New York: Penguin, 1984), 4, 9, 20, 27, 32.

were taught to subordinate their personalities to the role as written, the Method encouraged actors to improvise, to summon up childhood memories, and to explore their innermost feelings, often at the expense of what a playwright or screenwriter intended. Norman Mailer once said that Brando, in his pauses and his gazes into the middle distance, always seemed to be searching for a better line than the one the writer had composed. In effect, what Brando did, in the movies even more than on Broadway, was to lead a revolt—carried on by his successors and imitators, from James Dean to Warren Beatty to Robert De Niro to Meryl Streep—against the British school of acting with its reverence for the script and the written (and spoken) word.

Thus, since World War II, the emotional power of American acting lay more in what was not said, in the unearthing of passions that could not be communicated in words. The Method actor's reliance on physical mannerisms and even on silence in interpreting a role has been especially appropriate for a cinema that puts a premium on the inexpressible. Indeed, the influence of the Method, not only in the United States but also abroad (where it was reflected in the acting styles of Jean-Paul Belmondo, Marcello Mastroianni, and Albert Finney), is a classic example of how a foreign idea, originally intended for the stage, was adapted in postwar America to the movies, and then conveyed to the rest of the world as a paradigm for both cinematic and social behavior. More important, the Method's disregard for language permitted global audiences—even those not well-versed in English—to understand and appreciate what they were watching in American films.

Just as American filmmakers borrowed modernist ideas and practices,



and relied heavily on foreign talent, the notorious commercialism of Hollywood movies and of American popular culture in general is hardly peculiar to the United States. Picasso cared as much about the prices for his paintings, and Brecht about the number of people who came to his plays, as Louis B. Mayer did about the box office receipts for his movies and Walt Disney about the ratings of his television show or the profits at his theme parks.

On both sides of the Atlantic and Pacific, however, the hunger for a hit and the fear of commercial failure—and the effort therefore to establish an emotional connection with and enthrall an audience—have occasionally resulted in works that are original and provocative. No matter where they came from, the greatest directors—Charlie Chaplin,<sup>19)</sup> Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Federico Fellini, François Truffaut, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg—have always recognized the intimate connection between art and entertainment. To quote Woody Allen, the American filmmaker who is supposed to have the most pronounced “European” sensibility: “The audience has a right, when they sit down, to be entertained. No matter how intelligent your message, no matter smart or wonderful [or] progressive your ideas are, if they are not entertaining they should not be in a movie.”

In these instances, the requirements of the market and the urge to entertain have both served as stimulants for art. Hence, there may be no inherent contradiction between commerce and culture either in America or abroad. On the contrary, for the creators of high and

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19) Louis Giannetti, *Masters of the American Cinema* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 79.

mass culture alike, the relationship has often been symbiotic.

Yet many of the reasons for the global popularity of American movies also apply to the Indian film industry<sup>20</sup>—which is, perhaps even more than Hollywood, the most productive and profitable center of moviemaking in the world. In fact, India releases between 800 and 900 films a year, compared to an average of 250 American movies released annually in the U.S. Like Hollywood, Bollywood (as the name suggests) was from the beginning a commercial venture, built without the dependence (as in Europe) on government subsidies, and nurtured by vertically integrated film companies that controlled the production and distribution of their movies. Moreover, Indian films (again like Hollywood) have the advantage of a huge domestic market whose box office receipts Indian movie companies consistently dominate. In addition, the Indian domestic audience is as divided—regionally, ethnically, and religiously—as is the pluralistic American audience, so that Indian filmmakers (like their American counterparts) have had to develop the images and story lines, as well as the stars, that will appeal across class, caste, linguistic, and theological boundaries. As a result, Bollywood's movies are often far more successful with Indian audiences than are Hollywood's.

The crucial difference, however, between the American and the Indian film industries lies in their approach to and conquest of the export market; that is, in the greater capacity of Hollywood movies to enthrall audiences of all types all over the planet. Indian movies outside India primarily attract audiences made up of the Indian

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20) Nasreen Kabir, *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), 23.

Diaspora—native and second-generation Indians in Britain, China, Africa, and the Middle East as well as in other countries in South Asia. Indian films have a much harder time appealing to moviegoers who are not from, or have no ties to, India itself. Even though the subjects of Indian movies regularly duplicate the staples of Hollywood films—music, romance, fantasies, the family—it seems to be more difficult for non-Indian international audiences to grasp or empathize with what is going on in an Indian movie. In order to truly understand Indian films, one needs (or at least it helps) to know something about Indian history—its politics, traditions, music, and culture. In order to understand an American movie, a non-American needs to know very little, if anything, about political or cultural life, past or present, in the United States.

Because finally, American culture has imitated not only the modernists' visual flamboyance, but also their emphasis on personal expression rather than on the delivery of social messages. The psychological, as opposed to political, preoccupations of America's mass culture may have accounted, more than any other factor, for the worldwide popularity of American entertainment. American movies, in particular, have customarily focused on human relationships and private feelings, not on the problems of a particular time and place. They tell tales about romance, intrigue, success, failure, moral conflicts, and survival. The most memorable movies of the 1930s (with the exception of *The Grapes of Wrath*) were comedies and musicals about mismatched people falling in love, not socially conscious films dealing with the issues of poverty and unemployment. Similarly, the finest movies about World War II (*Casablanca*) or the

Vietnam War (*The Deer Hunter*) linger in the mind long after these conflicts have ended because they explored their characters' deepest emotions instead of dwelling on headline events.

Such intensely personal dilemmas are what people everywhere wrestle with. So Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans flocked to *Titanic*<sup>21</sup>) (as they once did to *Gone with the Wind*) not because these films celebrated "American" values, but because audiences—no matter where they lived—could see some part of their own lives reflected in the stories of love and loss. And without having to know anything about the historical events these films dramatized.

America's mass culture has often been witless, crude, and intrusive, as its critics—from American academics like Benjamin Barber to German directors like Wim Wenders—have always complained. In their eyes, American culture is "colonizing" everyone's subconscious, reducing us all to passive residents of "McWorld."

But American culture has never felt all that foreign to foreigners, not even in the Middle East. Just the opposite, at its best it has transformed what it received from others into a culture everyone everywhere could comprehend and embrace (if they did not always love), a culture that is—at least some of the time—both emotionally and artistically compelling for millions of people throughout the world.

So, despite the current hostility to America's policies and values—

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21) Gaylyn Studlar and Kevin Sandler, "Introduction: The Seductive Waters of James Cameron's Film Phenomenon"; Justin Wyatt and Katherine Vlesmas, "The Drama of Recoupment: On the Mass Negotiation of *Titanic*," in *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 1, 7-8, 31, 34.

not only in the Middle East but in Europe and Latin America as well—it is important to recognize how familiar much of American culture seems to people abroad. In the end, America’s mass culture has not transformed the world into a replica of the United States. Instead, the ethnic and racial pluralism of American society, together with its dependence on foreign cultural influences, has made the United States a replica of the world.

If Americans have mostly adopted and reshaped the artistic traditions of Europeans and others, if the cultural relationship between America and the rest of the world has not been as one-sided as foreigners usually insist, and if global entertainment is in fact an artistic and intellectual smorgasbord, are people outside the United States really losing respect for their native cultures?

There is no doubt that America’s culture is visible everywhere. But the ubiquitous presence of Coca-Cola billboards and fast-food chains is only a superficial sign of America’s global influence. None of this has affected how people actually live, shop, eat, think about the role of their governments, use their cities, or entertain themselves in neighborhood cafés or in the privacy of their homes.

In reality, the effect of America’s culture and consumer goods has been more negligible than intellectuals, politicians, and parents worried about the malleability of their Nike-clad children are willing to admit. Eating a Big Mac, lining up for the newest Hollywood blockbuster, or going to Disneyland in Paris or Tokyo doesn’t automatically mean that one has become either “Americanized” or a compliant inhabitant of the global village. The purchase of a Chicago

Bulls T-shirt by a Brazilian adolescent or the decision of a German family to have dinner at the nearby Pizza Hut does not necessarily signify an embrace of the American or the global way of life. Sometimes, to paraphrase Freud, a hamburger is just a hamburger, not an instrument of cultural or ideological seduction. And neither the movies nor the Internet compel people to wear the same clothes, listen to the same music, idolize the same screen heroes, speak the same language, or think the same thoughts.

Nor are audiences—either adolescent or adult—a collection of zombies, spellbound by the images transmitted by the global media. Intellectuals often overestimate the power of mass culture to manipulate the masses. People in America and abroad are affected not just by the media but by their genes, their childhoods, their parents, their spouses and friends, by their experiences at work and their problems at home. These varied influences enable people to resist or at least reinterpret the media's messages rather than silently submit. Hence, far from being docile, audiences have adapted global culture to their own tastes and traditions.

Still, the critics of globalization presume that unwary audiences, regardless of their dissimilar social backgrounds and life histories, will react to movies, television programs, and music in the same way. But given the volatility of the market and the shifting preferences of the audience, the American media has prospered by remaining competitive and eclectic, offering a multiplicity of icons and viewpoints that have different meanings for different groups at different times in different countries.

*Dallas*, for example, was the most popular television show in the

world during the 1980s. But studies of audience reactions to the program demonstrated that people in Holland interpreted the melodramatic lives of the Ewings very differently than audiences in Israel—or in America. These divergent interpretations were shaped almost entirely by the distinctive cultural assumptions and expectations of viewers in disparate parts of the world. Such dissimilar responses to the same television soap opera suggest that global entertainment has produced not a homogenous or a monocultural world, but a reinforcement of cultural diversity.

If anything, the globalization of mass communications sometimes leads not to cultural uniformity but to cultural fragmentation. The shared cultural experience that came from watching one or two television channels, or seeing movies with hundreds of others in a movie theater, has given way to multiple choices among hundreds of TV programs broadcast on satellite and cable stations, to family decisions about when to watch a movie or a television program on their VCR's or DVD's, and to more and more time spent by individuals on computers and the Internet. With these devices, we may be connected to the world, but often in our own way and at our own time, according to our own specific desires.

English, for instance, may have spread throughout the world but it has not thereby become a universal language, understood in the same way by everyone everywhere. Instead, millions of non-native speakers add their own words and meanings, creating a hybrid language that is less a reflection of British or American culture than one rooted in local needs.

Moreover, the critics of the international media conglomerates may have misjudged the ability of national, regional, local and ethnic

cultures to survive and even to flourish in an age of globalization. The growth of regionalism, for example, is reflected not only in the Islamic resistance to and even hatred of “Western” values, but in the tendency of different countries to export their own culture to neighboring lands. Mexico and Brazil transmit their films and television soap operas to other countries in Latin America. Sweden remains the dominant culture in Scandinavia. Egyptian and Indian movies are popular in other parts of the Middle East and Asia. The Hong Kong film industry is a major force in the East Asian market. At the same time, Argentina can look to France, Brazil to Africa, Chile to Spain, Mexico to its indigenous Indian language and history, for cultural alternatives to the United States.

Australia is a classic example of these regional forces at work. Until 1945, the dominant “foreign” culture in Australia was British. Afterwards, American popular culture became increasingly influential. But in the last two decades, as Australia has developed closer economic ties with the countries of the Pacific rim, and admitted larger numbers of immigrants from Vietnam, China, and Japan, Australians have begun to see themselves increasingly as a multicultural society—part European, part British, part American, and part Asian. In fact, the Australian experience illustrates the degree to which global culture has been eclectic rather than homogeneous, a culture made up of elements from many different countries and continents.

Finally, the movie and television industries in other countries are starting once again to capture the attention of local audiences. German television viewers increasingly favor dramas and situation comedies made in Germany. In Poland, which was inundated with American



movies after the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, several locally-produced films have attracted more ticket buyers than did *Titanic* or *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*.<sup>22)</sup>

Nonetheless, filmmakers in Europe and Asia have justifiably grumbled since the 1970s that they cannot get their works shown in the United States. For this, they blame Hollywood's monopoly on distribution, and the alleged loathing of American audiences for movies that are subtitled or dubbed. Yet some foreign language films—particularly in the past decade—have been surprisingly successful and influential in the United States. These include Italian movies like *Cinema Paradiso*, *Il Postino*, and *Life is Beautiful*; *Run Lola Run* which is the most successful German film ever released in America; and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which was the first foreign language film since Ingmar Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* in 1973 to be nominated for an Oscar for best picture of the year. Meanwhile, box office receipts in the United States for French films (like *Amélie* and *Under the Sand*) reached \$30 million in 2001, compared with just \$6.8 million in 2000. The renewed popularity and profitability of foreign films among general audiences in the United States should remind us that it has never been just college students and elite film critics who admire works that come from abroad.

None of these tendencies point to globalism's imminent demise. Instead, they raise a dilemma for millions of citizens in every country. How do we live in a global culture (whose elements are not

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22) Richard Maltby, "'Nobody Knows Everything': Post-Classical Historiographies and Consolidated Entertainment," in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.

exclusively American) while at the same time preserving our attachments to a neighborhood, a town, a region, or a nation?

One answer is that people in the future might have to maintain a dual set of allegiances—one to their local or national traditions and institutions, the other to an international culture. These multiple identities and divided loyalties can be paralyzing. And they can also lead, as we've been recently and tragically reminded, to a fanatical and totalitarian rejection of modernity.

Yet they may also be liberating because people can decide which cultural influences they allow at any moment into their lives. Given the innumerable and often competing cultural influences with which we all live daily, we have no choice except to choose.

In the end, neither foreigners nor Americans have been passive receptacles for Hollywood movies or MTV; we are all free to choose what to embrace and what to ignore. Recognizing this may enable people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to live more comfortably in what is, for all the arguments about “Americanization” and the fears of “globalization,” still a decidedly pluralistic world.

A fuller exposition of this arguments can be found in my new book: *Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies, and the Globalization of American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

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**Abstract**

**Foreign Influences on American Culture  
in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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The “Americanization” of the world is a myth. America’s cultural relationships with other countries are not one-sided. Instead, the relationship is reciprocal. Americans have always depended on foreign ideas, talent, immigrants, and refugees to contribute to developments in American painting, architecture, music, and films. As a result, America’s culture has been globally popular not because it turned the world into a replica of the United States, but because the United States is a replica of the world.

**Key Words**

Modernism, Art, Jazz, Movies, Acting