

“Universal Language”: American Film and Monoculture at Century’s End

As with other contributing elements to the culture of McWorld, movies and videos are ever more unitary in content as they become ever more global in distribution. More and more people around the world watch films that are less and less varied. Nowhere is American monoculture more evident or more feared than in its movies and videos.

Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*

While I was falling asleep I had the craziest thought: where I am now is the center of the world; every shitty television set no matter where, is the center of the world; the center has become a ludicrous idea, the world as well—an image of the world a ludicrous idea, the more TV sets there are in the world, and here I am in the country that builds them all for the whole world so that the whole world can watch the American images.

Wim Wenders, in *Tokyo-Ga*

In Wim Wenders’ diary film *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), a documentary tribute to the great Japanese auteur Ozu, the German expatriate filmmaker, having just finished a long sojourn in the United States, muses on the nature of images, first during a late night taxi ride, then while watching a late night movie in his Tokyo hotel room.

Show clip—about 2 minutes 10 seconds.

The movies have now passed their 100th birthday. Sara Moon’s fascinating compilation film *Lumiere and Company*, in which, as you know, 40 international filmmakers including David Lynch, Nadine Trintignant, Zhang Yimou, Liv Ullman, Spike Lee, Lasse Halstrom, and Peter Greenaway each made 52 second films with a replica of the original movie camera used by the brothers Lumiere in 1895, has come and gone after very little notoriety. Early in their history film pioneers and foundational theorists of the medium speculated about the possibility of this new art form becoming a kind of universal language. Griffith, for example, spoke of silent film as

potentially a “visual Esperanto,” capable of communicating with people the world over. Eisenstein imagined, with a bit of an assist from his colleague Pavlov, a “cinematic calculus” manipulating an audience’s thoughts at a level below the access of ordinary verbal language.¹ Avant-gardists like Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein, and later Alexandre Astruc, speculated, each in his own way, about film becoming a shared visual language that might help unite a post-Babel world.

At century’s end, the “art of the twentieth century” has, ironically, now come close to realizing this cinematic dream, but in distinctly postmodern, distinctly “late capitalist,” distinctly American fashion.

In the beginning the American film industry faced strong competition from Europe. Only between the two World Wars did its true world supremacy commence as an unaffected-by-the-Great-War Hollywood stepped into the breach and captured control of markets across Europe and Asia. By the mid 1920s, American films were grossing \$100 million in Europe alone (Campbell 188). Although in the decades to come a variety of obstacles to its continued domination would present themselves—including the coming of sound, the imposition of quotas, censorship, often violent anti-Americanism, another world war, and changing tastes—none could prevent it.

The widely-held European assumption that no one would want to hear American English spoken in talkies—an idea especially prominent in a prone-to-wishful thinking United Kingdom—turned out to be unfounded, and by the time the sound era was locked in resulted in only a few points shaved off the American market share. The seemingly difficult impediment presented by decidedly anti-open market

¹ Dudley Andrew summarizes Eisenstein’s approach in the following passage:

Great films affect their audiences in the manner of *autonomous art*, and these same montage theories this time promote the mysterious process of inner speech, that pre-linguistic patterning of phenomena which proceeds by the juxtaposition of bursts of attractions. Great films bypass conventional language which formally forces primal representations into a chain of deductive grammatical significations. In inner speech the only grammatical rule at play is association through juxtaposition. Like inner speech, film uses a concrete language in which sense comes not from deduction but from the fullness of the individual attractions as qualified by the image which they help to develop. (72-73)

quotas was deftly circumvented by creative Hollywood financing: the subsidizing of national cinemas, thus producing “quota quickies” that, by adding to the number of indigenous productions, allowed in turn ever-increasing importation of American films. Censorship—of crime, sex, religious issues, etc.—did manage to silence a variety of American exports in a variety of countries, as did governmental-level opposition to civil and racial themes in an increasingly tense geo-political climate in which (in the words of Robert Sklar) “American movies had become symbols of which side you were on” (225). But with the end of World War II even previously ostracized American films poured into Europe and Asia. *Film noir* was discovered and named. The “*politiques des auteurs*” was born.

As Sklar would note in a wonderful chapter of his *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* entitled “Selling Movies Overseas” (a chapter to which I owe a great debt here).

In the years between the two world wars, except where governments imposed limits, American motion pictures, and hence American images, ideals and products, almost completely dominated the world’s cinema screens—a near-monopoly unprecedented in American overseas commerce, as well as one of the most remarkable hegemonies in the history of intercultural communication. (215)

Today, at the end of Luce’s American century, America still completely commands world film.

Sklar offers a full history and interpretation of America’s early role in the world film market, and I will only summarize some of its salient features here.

- By the end of the Great War, America owned considerably more than half of all the movie screens in the world. (Sklar 215)
- American production values, then as now, surpassed by far those of any competitor nation, thus assuring attractiveness to audiences in search of state-of-the-art experiences. (Sklar 216)
- Motion-picture film itself was made to a universal standard which made movies more exportable than almost any other made-in-America commodity of the era.

- In the silent era, no language barrier stood in the way of movie circulation.
- The American motion picture industry was equated with the British empire in its dominance; a *Saturday Evening Post* editorial, for example, proclaimed in 1921 that “The sun, it now appears, never sets on the British Empire **and the American motion picture.**” A popular business slogan of the time, Sklar notes, was “trade follows the film.” (216)
- The influence of film on supply and demand in the economic sphere was not limited to the domestic market (recall the drop in undershirt sales when Gable was discovered not to be wearing one in *It Happened One Night*); Sklar records Japanese tailors going to American films to learn the latest fashion, American car sales increasing in Brazil, foreign architects building LA bungalows they had seen in Hollywood films. (216-17)
- American films were on the vast majority of European film screens. Two thirds of all films released during the silent era in France, once a preeminent film power, were American. Between the wars American films controlled an average of 75 to 90 per cent of new releases.

Sklar quotes the *London Morning Post* from 1923:

If the United States abolished its diplomatic and consular services, kept its ships in harbour and its tourists at home, and retired from the world's markets, its citizens, its problems, its towns and countryside, its road, motor cars, counting houses and saloons, would still be familiar in the uttermost corners of the world. . . .The film is to America what the flag was once to Britain. By its means Uncle Sam may hope some day, if he be not checked in time, to Americanize the world. (219)

Of course Uncle Sam was not checked.

Now at century's end, the American movie industry, compared recently by Gérard Depardieu to a “war machine” (Gianetti 524), rules its world.

- Foreign markets now bring in approximately 40% of major studio yearly gross earnings of over \$13 billion—a figure which includes TV and video (Marcom 100).

- The audiovisual industry now ranks second only to aerospace in the export sector of the American economy (Barber 90).
- In country after country (Hungary and Ireland may serve as particularly dramatic examples),² the dominance of American imports has made support of local filmmakers impossible. As Benjamin R. Barber has noted, “With or without resistance, nations with proud traditions of filmmaking independence like France, England, Sweden, India, Indonesia, and Japan are in fact gradually succumbing to the irresistible lure of product that is not only predominately American but, even when still indigenous, is rooted in the glamour of the seductive life-style trinity sex, violence, and money, set to a harmonizing score of American rock and roll” (90).
- In Germany, between 1972 and 1991, American films increased their share of all foreign imports from one third to two thirds (Barber 93).
- In recent years, the US has produced on average around 10% of the world’s feature films but secures 65% of the world’s total box office receipts (American Enterprise Institute; Gianetti 521).
- American films garner over 80% of all revenues from over \$2 billion European ticket sales in Europe (Barber 93).
- American theatre chains are investing large amounts of capital from England to eastern Europe in order to build brand new American-style multiplexes, meant to replace down-in-the-mouth classic houses which had deteriorated during the rise of television. (Marcom 98, 100-101)

²Two years ago I was privileged to attend a wonderful conference on Irish film at the University of Virginia. “Irish Film: A Mirror Up to Culture” brought virtually every important Irish filmmaker and scholar under one roof to screen and talk (and argue, loudly) about Ireland’s cinematic relations. Indeed, over 50 Irish films from the last two decades—both shorts and feature films, both experimental and mainstream—were screened over the three days of the conference. In the general session which ended the conference, however, the Irish themselves lamented that the films which had been assembled in one place that weekend in Charlottesville were almost impossible to see in Ireland itself, as I learned firsthand later that summer when I taught a class on Irish film on location. At the multiplexes in Dublin and Galway we could see *Spy Hard*, and *The Rock* and *How to Make an American Quilt*, but we could not see *Guiltrip*, or *Korea*, or *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars*. Such films, I learned to my dismay, were not even available in video stores.

- ❑ Video sales of American films in foreign countries are uniformly skyrocketing (Marcom 100).
- ❑ For a film to be successful in the contemporary world market, it almost has to be in English. As Bernd Eichinger has observed, “If you shoot a movie that is meant to be successful in a lot of territory, one of the rules that you have to understand is that you shoot in English, not to do so rules out two thirds of the market. Also you have to understand that 50 per cent of the market is the U.S. Market” (quoted in Finney 104).
- ❑ Studios now have available to them the “Ulmer Scale,” a ranking, based on an annual survey of dozens of US and international distributors and financiers, of the international star power of American actors and actresses. The scale allows its user to estimate the up-front marketability of a given star regardless of the merits of a particular film (Ulmer 37-38).
- ❑ There appears to be uniform agreement among studios and distributors that Hollywood has only skimmed the surface to date in its exploitation of world markets (Marcom 98, 100-101).
- ❑ A group of European directors have written Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese “desperately trying to protect European cinema against its complete annihilation” (Barber 92).

American hegemony on the world film scene is not limited to control of markets, however. If American movies are filling European and Asian screens and cine-dollars are flowing back into Hollywood coffers, many of the filmmakers who will make the American movies to be exported have themselves been imported. Hollywood has always drawn top directorial talent from overseas. In the studio era it was Billy Wilder (from Austria), Michael Curtiz (from Hungary), Charlie Chaplin and Alfred Hitchcock (from England), Robert Siodmak, Ernst Lubitsch, Douglas Sirk, Erich Von Stroheim and Fritz Lang (from Germany) who made the pilgrimage to movie Mecca.

Now the brain drain is from an even wider and deeper pool: Bill Forsyth (from Scotland), Neil Jordan (from Ireland), Peter Weir, George Miller, Bruce Beresford, Fred Schepisi, and Philip Noyce from Australia, Roman Polanski, for a time, and Agnieszka Holland from Poland, Paul Verhoeven (from Holland), Costa-Gavras (from Greece), Milos Forman (from Czechoslovakia), Jan DeBont (from the Netherlands), Mike Figgis, John Boorman, John Schlesinger, Ridley Scott and Tony Scott, Michael

Caton-Jones, Kenneth Branagh, etc. from England, John Woo from Hong Kong, Ang Lee from Taiwan, Roger Donaldson and Lee Tamahori (from New Zealand). Time does not permit here a discussion of the effects of transplantation on such individuals, but we may note in passing that in some cases, Bill Forsyth being a particularly sad example, coming to America has destroyed some promising careers.

What sort of product is the American “war machine” now sending abroad? It is important to remember that the current domination of our industry overseas, though hardly unprecedented, has been achieved with a new, highly streamlined, kind of film that bears the distinctive signature of its place and time. As a number of critics, most notably, perhaps, Mark Crispin Miller in “Hollywood the Ad,” have lamented, a general dumbing-down and homogenization of the movies appears to be taking place to make the medium into a more congenial carrier of advertising messages. Miller writes,

Today's movies offer no utopia, because, they say, everything you'd ever want is here on sale. The movies make this pitch first by concentrating on, and glamorizing, the closed sites of shopping and consumption: nice restaurants and luminous department stores, and the clean and roomy cell wherein the star keeps his or her posters, sweaters, jackets, copper pots, appliances. And the movie makes the pitch by packaging itself as a commodity. Like any smoke or Coke or fast-food burger, it is an item whose appeal fails to outlast the moment that it takes to suck it in. (“Hollywood the Ad”)

The movie-going experience, Miller remarks, has thus “become about as memorable as going to the airport” (“Hollywood the Ad”).

“Conceived and sold as product,” just like the many products that it sells, the movie passes right through you, leaving nothing in you but a vague, angry craving for another one. Today that craving is what keeps the movies going—and so they sell that kind of appetite, that infantile ravenousness, even as they offer you a daydream of your own tremendous strength. (“Hollywood the Ad”)

And surely it is not merely coincidental that the transformation which Miller decries is taking place during the rise of giant world media monopolies. The creation of

“Culture, Inc.,” as Herbert Schiller has deemed it, is bound to severely and adversely affect “Movies, Inc” (see Schiller and Bagdikian).

In a recent interview on National Public Radio (and, no doubt, in his forthcoming book on the Gulf War [*Spectacle : Operation Desert Storm and the Triumph of Illusion*] as well) Mark Crispin Miller has noted the world-historical irony governing the fate of the dream of film as a universal language. We have now achieved a kind of visual Esperanto out of gross simplification. The “Schwarzneggerization”—as Miller deems it—of the movies, the gross simplification of a complex art form of immense promise into Dolbyized, FX-enhanced, actioners—has created a “language” understandable world-wide, especially by the young men who constitute the prime national and international demographic for movie marketers.³ As *Entertainment Weekly* observes in a convincing argument for the superiority of television to film, “With an eye on the increasingly profitable international market, movie studios seem most interested in making action spectacles—the less dialogue to be translated, the better” (“Ten Reasons TV is Better Than the Movies” [http://www.pathfinder.com/@@fN3ywUANiy@L*iG/ew/951020/features/tv-vs-movies/297-tv-vs-movies1.html]). Of course, we must note, not all world-conquering American films have been Schwarzneggerized. Gumpification and Disneyfication can work wonders as well, as the \$329,452,287 world-wide gross of *Forrest Gump* and the \$312,775,367 of *The Lion King* certainly attest.

Sitting in a multiplex cinema anywhere in the world, Benjamin Barber writes, our experience of the movies is becoming increasingly homogenized.

You are nowhere. You are everywhere. Inhabiting an abstraction. Lost in cyberspace. You are chasing pixels on a Nintendo: the world surrounding you vanishes. You are in front of or on MTV: universal images assault the eyes and global dissonances assault the ears in a hear-pounding tumult that tells you everything except which country you are in. Where are you? You are in McWorld. (99)

³ “The key to huge opening weekends for movies,” *Entertainment Weekly* observes, “is young men; they're also the most likely to give a film repeat business” (“Ten Reasons TV is Better Than the Movies”).

To a discerning eye, of course, the handwriting was on the wall as early as 1925. In that year, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, seeking to explain his *Duino Elegies* in a letter to their Polish translator, could already recognize a decay of the real:

Now, from America, empty, indifferent things are pouring across, sham things, dummy life. . . . A house, in the American sense, an American apple or a grapevine over there, has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which went the hopes and reflections of our forefathers. . . . Live things, things lived and conscient of us, are running out and can no longer be replaced. We are perhaps the last still to have known such things. (*Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* 374-75; Rilke's emphasis)

Now, as the movies pour across as well, Rilke's complaint, an increasingly common protestation from both East and West against American cultural imperialism between the wars, an objection which would have more than a little to do with German and Japanese hatred of all things American, seems almost contemporary. Across now the Japanese, world history's greatest chameleons, are making those television sets which carry the American images.

As we speak, of course, reality could be in the process of defying my theorizing. British cinema has returned from the grave. When I taught a class on British film in London in 1992 every expert who spoke to my class, from a representative of the British Film Institute, to Lindsay Anderson, to Raymond Durnat was convinced that the making of feature films in the UK had no future. Five years later, however, the critically acclaimed films of Mike Leigh, the highly regarded *Brassed Off*, and the very popular *The Full Monty* have put British cinema back on the map. In a recent report by Michael Goldfarb on National Public Radio, several experts interviewed agreed that such successes have resulted, paradoxically, from the filmmakers seeking to please themselves and local audiences without regard for the world market and predicted that the roll will continue.

Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps my ranting is misguided. But we live in the "age of the Los Angelization of planet Earth," as cultural historian and futurist William Irwin Thompson calls it. We live in a time in which Hindus in India have replaced a wafer used ritualistically in a communion-like ceremony for over 2,000 years with

Ritz crackers (Barnet). As William Irwin Thompson surmises in *The American Replacement of Nature*,

America's critical role in the planetization of humanity does seem to be that of the catalytic enzyme that breaks down all the traditional cultures of the world, be they Asiatic, Islamic, or European. With Disneyland in Paris and Tokyo, the United States is well on its way to dissolving all the world cultures, and I do not think any nativistic revolt of Islam will succeed in stopping it any more than Marxist-Leninism did.

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