

From Modernism to the Movies: The Globalization of American Culture in the 20th Century

Richard Pells

University of Texas, Austin

* This is a revised version of an article first published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 12, 2002), pp. B7-B9

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 But since the beginning of 2002, this international affection has been replaced by resentment at America’s political “arrogance,” its overwhelming economic and military power, and the Bush administration’s apparent “unilateralist” foreign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 cultural dominance is not new. 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.

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.

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. 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.

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 as a global language has been essential to the acceptance of American culture. But the power of American capitalism and the worldwide familiarity with English 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 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, 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 prototype for his first theme park in Anaheim, a model later re-exported to Tokyo and Paris).

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 20th century, on 19th-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 19th-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 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 19th-century barriers between high and low culture were resolutely, if imperfectly, maintained.

The artists of the early 20th 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.

Although modernism assaulted the conventions of 19th 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 19th 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 20th 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 shows. Stravinsky's experiments with atonal (and thus unconventional and unmelodic) music validated the rhythmic innovations of jazz. Writers like Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, detesting the rhetorical embellishments of 19th-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 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 20th 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 – 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 refugee 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 20th 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, and Leonard Bern-

stein incorporated folk melodies, religious hymns, blues and gospel songs, and jazz into their symphonies, concertos, operas, and ballets. Bernstein's *West Side Story*, 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. Even an art as quintessentially American as jazz evolved during the 20th century into an amalgam 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 20th 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. The first American movie star, after all, was Charlie Chaplin, whose comic skills were honed in British music halls.

Moreover, during much of the 20th 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. Pabst, 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, 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 Truf-

faut'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 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, Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg, Woody Allen – were American. The Americans may have owed their improvisational methods and autobiographical preoccupations largely to Italian neo-Realism and the French News 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.

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 20th-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.

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 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 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, 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. 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 – 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 and Marcello Mastroianni), 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, 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. 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 mass culture alike, the relationship has often been symbiotic.

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, suc-

cess, 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* (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.

America's mass culture has often been witless, crude, and intrusive, as its critics have always complained. 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 – 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.