MOREOVER
Culture wars

PARIS AND LOS ANGELES

Is American culture, like a horror-monster’s foot, about to crush the world? Only in film does America really rule—and cultural protection is no answer

FRANCE’S Ministry of Culture does not look like the sort of place where pessimism ought to flourish. The ministry occupies a wing of Richelieu’s magnificent Palais Royal, round the corner from the Comédie Française and just a short walk from the Louvre and the Opéra. On their way to lunch its inhabitants have to pick their way through throngs of tourists who have come from all over the world to admire France’s cultural riches.

Yet pessimism flourishes here nonetheless. The ministry’s officials are convinced that a rising tide of American popular culture is swamping France. And they spend much of their working lives administering a complex system of quotas and subsidies that are designed to protect French culture from total submersion.

The ministry has almost uniform support for its position among a French cultural elite worried about the threat that America poses, particularly to French film. Their concern is not, as sometimes claimed, that an upstart America hijacked the French national invention of Méliès and the Lumières. Rather it is that Hollywood is a Trojan horse bringing with it Disneyland Paris, fast-food chains and free advertising for American products from clothes to rock music. “America is not just interested in exporting its films,” says Giles Jacob, the head of the Cannes Film Festival. “It is interested in exporting its way of life.”

These French people lead a world guerrilla army hoping to curb American cultural hegemony. In 1989 the French government persuaded the European Community to decree that 40% of TV programmes should be domestic. It also strengthened their complex system of support (which taxes cinema tickets to help French film production) by extending it to television programmes. In 1993 France threatened to sabotage the GATT trade round in order to exempt audio-visual materials from free trade agreements.

The French have found a powerful ally in Canada, which has long been terrified of being swamped by its closest neighbour. Of the films shown on Canadian screens, 96% are foreign, primarily American. Three-quarters of the music on Canadian radio is not Canadian. Four in five magazines sold on news-stands in Canada, and six in every ten books, are foreign, mainly American.
In June Canada organised a meeting in Ottawa about American cultural dominance. Nineteen countries attended, including Britain, Brazil and Mexico; the United States was pointedly excluded. At issue were ways of exempting cultural goods from treaties lowering trade barriers, on the view that free trade threatened national cultures. The Ottawa meeting followed a similar gathering in Stockholm, sponsored by the United Nations, which resolved to press for special exemptions for cultural goods in another global trade pact, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

**What exactly is the problem?**

Quite apart from its recommended solutions, is the “resistance” to American cultural imperialism correct in its diagnosis of the problem? Lurking here are three distinct questions. Is Hollywood as powerful as its enemies imagine? Is there an identifiable thing you can sensibly label “American culture”? And does America’s domination extend to every corner of the popular arts and entertainment?

A strong case can be made out that America dominates world cinema. It may not make most feature films. But American films are the only ones that reach every market in the world. (The highly successful films of India and Hong Kong hardly travel outside their regions.) In major markets around the world, lists of the biggest-grossing films are essentially lists of Hollywood blockbusters in slightly differing orders with one or two local films for variety. In the European Union the United States claimed 70% overall of the film market in 1996, up from 56% in 1987; even in Japan, America now accounts for more than half the film market. “Titanic” has grossed almost $1.8 billion worldwide. “Armageddon” and “Lethal Weapon 4” play well from Belgium to Brazil.

Hollywood’s empire also appears to be expanding by the year. Hollywood now gets roughly half its revenues from overseas, up from just 30% in 1980. At the same time few foreign films make it big in the United States, where they have less than 3% of the market. Between 1995 and 1996 Europe’s trade deficit with the United States in films and television grew from $4.8 billion to $5.65 billion.

Striking figures, to be sure. Yet the more one looks at many of these films the less distinctively American they become. One reason for Hollywood’s success is that from the earliest days it was open to foreign talent and foreign money. Some of the great figures of Hollywood—Chaplin, Murnau, Stroheim, Hitchcock—were imports. And now, two of the most powerful studios, Columbia Tristar and Fox, are owned by foreign media conglomerates, Japan’s Sony and Australia’s News Corporation.

Several of Hollywood’s most successful films have drawn heavily on international resources. “Three Men and a Baby”, which helped to revive Disney after a fallow period in the mid-1980s, was a remake of a French comedy. “Total Recall” was made partly with French money, directed by a Dutchman and starred an Austrian, Arnold Schwarzenegger. “The English Patient” was directed by a Briton, shot in Italy, and starred French and British actresses.
It may even be argued that it is less a matter of Hollywood corrupting the world than of the world corrupting Hollywood. The more Hollywood becomes preoccupied by the global market, the more it produces generic blockbusters made to play as well in Pisa as Peoria. Such films are driven by special effects that can be appreciated by people with minimal grasp of English rather than by dialogue and plot. They eschew fine-grained cultural observation for generic subjects that anybody can identify with, regardless of national origins. There is nothing particularly American about boats crashing into icebergs or asteroids that threaten to obliterate human life.

**Hollywood is not America**

The very identification of Hollywood with American culture, particularly American high culture, is itself a mistake. So is confusing screen conduct with real conduct, although plenty of serious-minded people do seem to treat Hollywood as a ruinous influence on American manners and morals: Michael Medved, an American screenwriter turned cultural commentator, argues that, far from nurturing deep-rooted values, Hollywood helps destroy them. “Tens of millions of Americans now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy,” he argues, “an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children.” Making a point more about art than behaviour, Terry Teachout, a music critic, says that educated Americans would cheer if an earthquake reduced Hollywood’s sound stages to rubble. “The ‘enemy’ at the gates is not the United States, free trade or even Walt Disney,” he says with deliberate effect, “it is democracy.”

Instead of treating the sovereignty of popular taste as something that underpins America’s cultural domination of the world, many of America’s neoconservatives (and some liberals) see it rather as a perilous solvent acting on the United States itself. The country, they fear, is dissolving into a babble of discordant ethnic voices without a common cultural identity or a shared national purpose. And they put much of the blame on the proliferation of foreign-language media outlets. One of the most popular television channels in Los Angeles is KMFX 34, which broadcasts in Spanish; there are also channels which broadcast exclusively in Korean, Cantonese and Japanese, and others that rent air-time for Yiddish and Russian broadcasts. Even in the shadow of the Hollywood sign it is possible to live without bowing the knee to a majority culture.

The world’s culture ministers might well reply that the inroads that Spanish and Korean television have made into the United States are as nothing compared with the inroads that American television has made into their home countries. The deregulation of television in the 1980s created a legion of upstart stations that were desperate for content—and much of the cheapest and most reliable content came from America.

Yet as new stations establish themselves they tend to drop generic American products in favour of local productions: audiences still prefer homegrown fare if given the choice. In every European country in 1997, the most popular television programme was a local production. “Navarro”, an unmistakably French action drama, has never had less than a 33% market share. Across the channel, “Inspector Morse”, a much re-run British detective series, owes its lasting appeal to an Oxford setting and a curmudgeonly hero.
In rock music, Europe rules

The strength of local ties is even more apparent in pop music, long supposed to provide the soundtrack to America’s cultural hegemony. The United States has never enjoyed the same dominance of pop music as it has of cinema, having to share the global market with Britain. According to a just published book reporting the results of a rock-music poll of 200,000 people aged from nine to 62 in America and Europe, “The All-Time Top 1,000 Albums” (Virgin; £16.99. London Bridge; $24.95), seven of the ten most popular albums were British. As the rock market fragments into niches—from urban rap to techno—it is harder and harder to create global brands.

A few years ago few self-respecting teenagers would be caught dead listening to French or Swedish pop groups. (The Swedish group Abba was almost the definition of naff.) Now French groups such as Air and Daft Punk and Swedish groups such as Ace of Base and the Cardigans are decidedly cool. In Germany, the world’s third-largest music market after the United States and Japan, local performers account for 48% of the DM6 billion ($3.5 billion) in yearly sales, double the percentage five years ago. Two leading music channels, Viva and Viva-2, now devote about 40% of their time to German titles. In Spain, 58% of the total $1 billion music sales are generated by Spanish and Latin American artists. In the French market, French rock groups account for nearly half the country’s total sales. MTV makes different programmes for different regions.

As America’s pop-music industry struggles with a stagnating international market, European groups are finding it easier to cross borders. Americans buy some $2 billion worth of Spanish music a year. Ace of Base’s first record was one of the biggest selling debut records ever, dominating the American charts. German techno bands such as Mr President have had a string of international successes. Ibiza is the capital of global dance music. Daft Punk sold 900,000 albums outside France last year, earning some 77m francs ($13m). Even Iceland has a global star in Bjork.

So long Broadway

The American empire is equally shaky in other areas of popular culture. The British have dominated popular musicals since the appearance of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat” and “Jesus Christ Superstar” in the mid-1970s. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Macintosh revived what had become a geriatric art form with catchy tunes, clever lyrics sumptuous sets and relentless marketing. They turned British musicals into both a major tourist attraction and an important export. “The Phantom of the Opera” has been seen by an estimated 52m people, pulling in more than £1.5 billion ($2.5 billion). Basle has a purpose-built theatre for “Phantom”, Bochum, in Germany, has one for “Starlight Express” and Frankfurt has one for “Sunset Boulevard”, complete with its own hotel.

As for fashion, the great houses of Paris and Milan dominate the high end of the market, London its street-wise, popular base. Walk down Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, with its
outlets for Gucci, Valentino and Armani, and America looks like the cultural colony, not Europe. Here too it is the British who are shaking up the industry. Jean-Paul Gaultier claims that he gets some of his best ideas by walking around London. Ex-punker Vivienne Westwood is a grand dame in Paris and Milan, and two big French houses recently put young British designers, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen, in charge.

Even in publishing and magazines—an area that particularly worries the Canadians—American domination is by no means clear-cut. The best-known magazine editor in the United States is an Englishwoman, Tina Brown, who is credited with reviving (before leaving) both “Vanity Fair” and “The New Yorker”. Foreign companies control half of America’s top 20 publishing houses. Earlier this year Bertelsmann, a German conglomerate, purchased America’s biggest publisher, Random House, provoking headlines about American culture being sold to foreigners.

In fact, Bertelsmann may well be a stronger global force than its American-owned rivals. After the fall of the Berlin Wall it built a network of book clubs, publishers and record companies across the old Soviet block. It holds a stake in Prague’s City Radio, owns the biggest newspaper in Hungary and in Slovakia, and has launched a glossy science magazine in Russia in a venture with the Orthodox Church.

Don’t protect

Even if America really were as powerful as its cultural adversaries imagine, the commonly suggested solution of protection would not be the answer. Take film, where there is no question about Hollywood’s might. Quotas are about as suitable to the modern age as the horse and carriage. Anybody who wants to watch an American TV programme in prime time can flick through an ever-increasing number of channels—or rent a video. Quotas also have the perverse effect of encouraging the production of “quota quickies”—banal local productions designed only to satisfy official mandates and capture the subsidies that often come with them.

The case for subsidies is hardly more robust. Government handouts tend to go to the people who have least need of them. France’s Centre National de la Cinématographie gives the biggest subsidies to the country’s most successful film producers. One of the three British film companies that get grants from Britain’s National Lottery is run by the producers of two of the most successful British films of recent years, “Four Weddings and a Funeral” and “Trainspotting”. At best, this means that public money is used to subsidise films that would have been made anyway; at worst, it means that talented producers spend their time lobbying the government rather than making good films.

In some cases subsidies even end up supporting the sort of Hollywood fodder that they are meant to thwart. The past decade has seen a steady trek of Hollywood producers to Canada, particularly Toronto, in search of subsidies and a nice exchange rate. (Films and television shows made in Canada—even by foreigners—are eligible for government handouts; Canadian television channels also pay a premium for programmes that help them meet government requirements for Canadian content.) Toronto has doubled for New York city in more than 100 films (including “Moonstruck” and “I’ll Take Manhattan”).
and TV series (including “Due South” and “Gangsters”). Alliance Communications, which produces “Due South”, about a Canadian mountie who busts Chicago street gangs, calculates that the show would cost about 40% more to produce in Chicago.

Jeanne Moreau, the doyenne of French film actresses, suggests a more hopeful way of preserving French (and by implication other national) film industries. French film producers, she argues, should stop relying on protectionism (“an attitude born from fear”) and should start believing in themselves again. They should realise that the building of new cinemas and the explosion of television channels provides them with an opportunity: “The beast needs to be fed,” she laughs. They should learn from Hollywood’s storytelling skills and from its *savoir-faire*. And they should form alliances with Hollywood studios to exploit its technical skills and its marketing might.

This answer has the merit of working with the grain of new technology and new Hollywood thinking. Some time ago studios began to set up or buy independent studios to reduce their dependence on extravagant blockbusters and reach beyond their most reliable audience of teenage morons. That restless quest for new ideas and fresh talent has now lead them to create subsidiaries in Europe: Sony’s Bridge in London; a Miramax office in Berlin and offshoots of Warner Brothers both there and in Paris.

Cultural protectionists might well complain that this is yet more evidence of America’s remorseless penetration into European markets. Yet what is it that they object to—the Americanness of the company or the Americanness of its products? On balance, global companies, be they American-, Australian-or German-owned, do best when serving local markets, local ways and local tastes.

The United States will always have a big influence on popular culture. America has the advantage of a huge domestic market, a language that is becoming ubiquitous and a genius for marketing. Its worldwide image is of the nation that reached modernity first, inventing trends from blue jeans to rock ’n’ roll, since widely adopted—and adapted—elsewhere. Whether they want to resist American modernity from fear or from envy, cultural protectionists are wrong to think they can direct taste through subsidies and quotas. And they err yet more if they think that, given a free choice, their citizens will prefer American to local artefacts. Those officials at France’s Ministry of Culture have less to fear than they think.