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Displacing culture: transnational culture, regional elites and the challenge to national cinema[1]

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The lament is a familiar one: civilization is in decline; the best that has been thought and said is falling on deaf ears; the barbarians are at the gate; the end is nigh! Highly publicized court cases blame acts of violence on mass media's corrosive influence; motion pictures are credited with debasing society's moral standards, corrupting children's world views, and eroding the nation's literacy levels; and members of the conservative elite and concerned parents alike clamour for more 'real' culture as a way to restore long-cherished values. The remarkable thing about these concerns is that they galvanized cultural debates within the United States from the turn of the century until the First World War, and have managed to retain their critical power even today, where they are regularly reinvoked in debates over mass culture. And just as remarkably, these charges also have a familiar ring for the several generations of Europeans exposed to complaints and fears triggered by American mass culture. At both ends of the century and on both sides of the Atlantic, the debates over these issues have resulted in cultural counter-offensives ranging from the construction of public libraries and state schools to the creation of subsidy systems for the stimulation of high culture —all part of a process dubbed by Paul DiMaggio 'sacralization'.[2] The cultural targets of these efforts have been linked by their 'mass' or 'low' status: popular fiction and 'cheap' melodrama at the start of the century, and the new media that followed in their wake— film, television, and more recently video and computer games.

Judging by the broad patterns of discursive correspondence over the century and on both sides of the Atlantic, these issues have been somewhat indiscriminately invoked in efforts ranging from the preservation of national cultural hierarchies, to the defence of national cultural markets, to arguments for cultural expansionism. The results, despite the temporary advantages they have offered one constituency or another, have tended to obscure rather than clarify the basic terms of the debate. And so it is that nearly 100

years after the basic terms of the debate have been established, we find ourselves in the same impasse.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of the film medium. The position advocated particularly by the French during the GATT talks, that film as a cultural good justifies national protectionism, recalls arguments used by the United States film industry in the period between 1908 and 1913. In both cases, however, national cultural protectionism masks not only economic interests, but a tension between the interests of elite and mass culture. This discursive divide in turn, lurks behind those attempts to develop or sustain cinema as a national or regional expressive form which have in fact resulted in films tailored to the tastes of elites, films which fail to engage a broader national public, while at the same time reaching a trans-national elite. A 'slippage' in the terms of the argument has been used both to mobilize nationalist interests while sustaining certain hierarchies of taste, with the result that the possibilities for cinema as a developed and meaningful national or regional mass medium have been marginalized. The following pages will re-examine the arguments which have led to this situation. The task of identifying alternatives or possibilities for cinema as a collective or mass expression of national culture, however, remains for others to develop.

The contested nature of national culture

Like so many of the historical conflicts between the United States and Europe, the current discussion over popular culture, and in particular the products of American popular culture industries, is predicated upon the contested nature of national culture. Should national culture be protected, permeable, or expansionist, and with what consequence in an increasingly internationalized media environment? The GATT talks in the audiovisual sector gave a focus to these concerns, providing a useful site from which to consider competing views on both sides of the Atlantic. Of course, the GATT discussions were muddied by competing economic claims (their agenda, after all) but despite the often opportunistic invocation of cultural argument for economic gain, culture —and cultural difference— remained in the foreground. Throughout the talks, the European view of a fragile (national) cultural *status quo* in need of protection contrasted sharply with the United States' view of a permeable, dynamic culture, powered by a (trans-national) cultural imperative of a 'free flow of information'. Not so explicit was the basis for such a profound difference. If we set aside profits as a primary motive, this difference in perspective can perhaps be accounted for by looking at the very different traditions and definitions of national culture on both sides.

Portrayed in the broad strokes of caricature, European cultures have tended to distinguish themselves through the deep structures of national language, through shared expressive traditions and folklore, and through the *longue durée* provided by ruling elites and their institutions. These concepts are not unproblematic, but nevertheless have a certain 'taken-for-grantedness' about them in our present that fits somewhat awkwardly with historical conditions of the last century. National language, for instance, while offering a deep identity structure, is nevertheless challenged by regional dialect and

patterns of class accent. Expressive traditions (national emblems, costumes, holidays, customs), while widely celebrated, tend often to be figments of the political imagination, identity myths cultivated during periods of national consolidation (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1986). Yet some along the margins continue to contest these practices, as evidenced in cultures from Wales to the Balkans. The cultural power of relatively fixed social formations, those long-standing elites who have monopolized cultural (and often political) institutions and defined cultural convention, continues to be exercised despite democratic processes.[3] But, regardless of the 'real' complexities of these concepts, they nevertheless function as key sites of identity to most nations within Europe.

The social cohesiveness and historical depth of European notions of national culture stand in dramatic contrast to those dominant in the United States. European colonization of a native population, wave upon wave of subsequent European, Asian, South American, and African migration, all compounded by the inevitable problems of power and generation difference, have resulted in the United States' significantly different construction of national culture. On one hand, dominant groups struggled to impose imported value systems on a multicultural constituency via the language and expressive culture of Shakespeare and Milton and the political legacy of Britain and France; on the other, polyglot, multi-ethnic constituencies selectively assimilated, challenged, and recombined dominant culture with their own in a process that might best be described as 'creolization'.

Despite nodding acknowledgement of the deep language and identity structures taken for granted in Europe, the United States' construction of national culture has in fact depended to a large extent upon a shared set of somewhat arbitrary symbols —the flag, the figure of George Washington, and 'liberty and justice for all'. Many European nations have symbolic structures of the same age and 'arbitrariness' as America's (the French revolution, for instance), but they are reinforced by linguistic and societal continua, whereas in the United States they must effectively compensate for weaknesses in both of these areas while competing with 'imported' symbols. One of the results of these differing traditions is that in the United States, a far greater mix of social actors has access to the cultural stage (or seen another way, America's cultural filtration process substitutes the democracy of money and fame for the aristocracy of blood). Despite the efforts of elites to delimit 'appropriate' expressive forms and control the cultural hierarchy, this dynamic means that commercial or popular culture has a *de facto* legitimacy in the United States that remains problematic in Europe.

The deep structures of coherence evident in European notions of national culture and the comparatively 'superficial' and symbolic ideas binding together American culture lurk behind the perceptions which praise one type of expressive activity as 'true' culture and another as 'mere' entertainment or commerce. This leads in turn to curious contradictions. For example, the status of Monteverdi or Picabia seems largely in the hands of cultural elites (together with their institutions), slipping easily across national borders as cultural desiderata within certain limited taste formations. The collections of major American and European art museums, just as the programming of their major concert halls, tend to be constructed around the same pantheon of creative genius and

serve the same cultural elites. By contrast, Hollywood films, relatively 'faceless' products which accommodate different taste formations, also slip easily across national borders and also grace the screens of theatres on both sides of the Atlantic; but unlike their high culture counterparts, they generate concern, criticism, and charges of cultural expansionism along with their mass audiences.

Although the problem as articulated by European cultural elites is most often put in terms of protecting the local from transnational (American) incursions, the emphatically transnational nature of the 'high' culture of Mozart and Balzac suggests that we should look for a different set of motives for the critique on Hollywood. Critics have suggested a range of possibilities. Might the 'difficulty' with transnational popular culture rest with assumptions regarding the relative competences of elite audiences *versus* mass audiences? Should we look to the different (and competing) interests of the various social formations involved? How does national context and the role of the (national) 'Other' bear upon this situation? Perhaps addressing this last issue first will put us in a better position to consider the trans-Atlantic problems with the Hollywood film.

America

At least for the past century, much of the international discussion about 'America' has related directly to the effects and expectations of its culture industry. Indeed, the range of meanings invoked by the word 'America' offers a powerful instance of what happens when both sides of the debate discursively transform the conception of national culture into something vague and self-serving.[4] From the turn of the century onwards, the meaning of 'America' could range from evoking a sense of refuge for Europe's '-unwanted', to instilling a sense of dread as an object lesson of what could happen if the 'low-brows' took over. This most vexed of nations could simultaneously convey the blessings of modernism (itself a vexed term) as a form of progress and efficiency, or the excesses of barbarism and consumerism, the beginning of the end of culture. Moreover, these patterns of meanings have been neither static nor mutually exclusive, shifting across time and cultural space as America's reception in Europe immediately after both wars attests. To complicate things even further, the meaning of American culture differs across generational and ideological lines, with some youth groups embracing blue jeans and American popular music while rejecting the conservatism of American political culture, with older, more traditional groups taking the reverse view.

Even within America itself, substantial debate has challenged any easy definition of values (let alone a monolithic conception of 'America'). Historically, members of cultural elites such as Henry James lamented the incursions of the 'inconceivable alien' upon American soil as East European and Italian immigrants settled in turn-of-the-century New York.[5] Genealogical associations (Daughters of the American Revolution), revivals of long neglected historical icons (the late-19th-century George Washington cult), and public institutions (libraries and schools), all shared in the work of keeping America '-American', a task continued in the present by the likes of E.D. Hirsch and William Bennett.[6] This particular tradition of self-appointed guardians of culture has generally taken a dark view of the popular culture, of which films form an important part, associating it with 'alien' values and the gradual undermining of 'authentic' American culture.

The dynamic circulation and change that drives American culture, as well as culture's proximity to mercantile capitalism, seems at odds with established European culture, the last bastion of aristocratic power. But even in some American debates, this dynamic seems in part fuelled by an awareness that a free-floating culture brings with it challenges to the power of traditional cultural guardians, in the process threatening to destabilize their dominant position in the cultural hierarchy. Such 'challenges' may speak even more powerfully to Europe's entrenched cultural elites, with the added twist that, given their centrality to the construction of nation, these threats may have far more resonant cultural impact. In this sense, even though elites on both sides of the Atlantic may defend a shared tradition and vision of culture, the consequences may be more profound for the construction of European national culture than that of America.

Far more powerfully than the amorphous formulation of 'national culture', '-American' culture, an oxymoron to some, masks contradictory meanings. Thus, the implications of the phrase 'American dominance in the audiovisual sector' could range from a celebration of pluralistic democratic access to a lament over the debasement of cultural tradition, divergent meanings not self-evident to either side of the debate. But again, the point is that the Atlantic is not necessarily the most interesting dividing line. Many of the same fears and concerns of America as 'low culture' bind together conservative elites within the United States and Europe, just as progressive intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic seem to retain a fascination with the promise of America's cultural diversity.

Motion Pictures

The term 'motion pictures', too, seems to conjure up rather wide-ranging meanings common to certain cohorts in Europe and America. For example, from the introduction of the medium in 1895 until its popularization by 1908 (give or take a few years) film enjoyed the respectability accorded new inventions and middle-brow entertainments on both sides of the Atlantic.[7] Popularization of the medium and its attraction to mass audiences, however, drew the wrath of cultural arbiters, with clerics, educators, and the respectable press attacking the medium as a 'cheap amusement' responsible for '-debasing', 'demoralizing', and 'corrosive' effects on its viewers (Uricchio and Pearson 1994). One can find striking parallels between the alleged cultural effects of the medium in the period before World War I and those asserted by critics of popular culture today.

One can also find uncanny parallels to contemporary European criticism of American popular film: American film producers before 1914 often complained that the French film industry, then the world's leading film business, undermined American culture. Unspecified charges of immorality in 'foreign' films led to investigations and censorship, with calls from the Motion Picture Patents Company (the patent 'trust' which included Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, and a somewhat disempowered Pathe) to

stop the importing of unregulated European films (Anderson 1983). In this case, the American film industry 'establishment' sought to align itself with those in the larger culture critical of the immorality so often associated with films, thus forging a strategic alliance with the 'respectable' classes while striking a blow at the competition, the non-trust or independent film exhibitors who provided an important outlet for European productions.

The strategy of the film trust's discursive alliance with its cultural enemies, and its targeting of foreign competition as the 'real' problem, resonates with contemporary practice but in reverse fashion, with elements in the European film industry joining with critics of popular culture in an attack on Hollywood for its cultural barbarism (and its market). The importance of the cultural 'Other' for purposes of self definition also links American film practice at the start of the century with European practice today. Between 1907 and 1913, American producers tended to define 'American' film less by positive assertion than by difference: American film, whatever it might be, was *not* French (Abel 1994). A close reading of contemporary European press criticism and interviews with industry insiders would suggest that the same dynamic plays a defining role in the identity of the European film —whatever it is, it is *not* Hollywood.

American versus European film

At least as far as patterns of cultural participation are concerned, members of European and American cultural elites were united in their disdain of Hollywood films in much the same way that European and American mass audiences were joined by their embrace of them. If the former response can be understood in terms of the inevitable loss of cultural authority faced by once- dominant cultural elites, what about the latter? The search for the secret of Hollywood's success continues, and judging by the efforts of the European MEDIA project, it must have something to do with marketing and distribution. These are certainly *sine qua nons*, but as the relatively high failure rate even of heavily marketed Hollywood films demonstrates, they are by no means sufficient conditions for popular success.

The 'Hollywood' film's success, certainly *vis-à-vis* the 'European' film's, might be more usefully approached by considering its cultural position and the realities of its production. Hollywood has been centrally concerned with popular culture, not traditional or elite aesthetic values (the domain instead of some American independent[8] productions as well as many subsidized European films). It has embraced the most damning caricatures of its efforts as populist, winning a healthy profit in the process. By contrast, the independent, national and art film (whether American or European) faces an uphill battle cursed both as an anomaly for 'mass' audiences, and as still tainted by its medium for other members of the elite. In terms of transnational marketing, Hollywood has been fortunate to have multinational financing, some of the world's most successful writers, directors, and actors, and most importantly, a domestic cultural base that requires products oriented towards a multicultural audience. What appears at first glance as a diffused, nebulous film form marked more by its expensive production values and formulaic narratives than by artistic integrity or vision, in fact is a form that manages to relate to a wide range of audience backgrounds. Unfortunately for some of its critics, the negative caricature of the motion picture elides more than it reveals; but for audiences not so concerned with elite value systems or taste judgments, the medium seems to provide its share of pleasures.[9]

The wide range of present (and historical) meanings inherent in such recurrent terms in the debate over American culture industries as 'national culture', 'America', and 'film' points to several central disjunctions. Competing ideas of national culture might suggest that the Atlantic shapes the terms of the debate, but the far more complicated patterns of meaning for 'American culture' and 'film' suggest that, on the contrary, divisions exist *within* rather than *between* the United States and Europe. By looking more carefully at the deployment patterns of these and related terms, a somewhat clearer sense of the strategies or intentions behind them might be gained.

Cultural rhetoric in action

The discourse over the film medium and national culture has taken many forms. Nationalist sentiments have of course long enveloped debates on cultural transmission; but film has also been the object of intellectual consideration, where the medium's representational and cultural capacities have been discussed. And, the struggle to stimulate domestic film production or contain imports has encouraged economic consideration, while leading to specific protectionist policies. In each of these encounters the previously discussed terms recur, and in their redeployment, they reveal something of the vexed and often contradictory conception of popular film.

Nationalist opportunism

The long and complicated history of nationalist rhetoric obviously extends to the discussion of film culture. The medium's history is shot through with its expressions. From the European side, we might consider the marketing techniques behind France's world domination in the years before Word War I, or the rise in the 1920s of Film Europe, a precursor of sorts of the MEDIA initiative. Europe's position, at least after 1919, has understandably been primarily concerned with national cultural and/or national market protectionism. The American side is perhaps more complicated since, particularly after 1919, it enjoyed international markets but nevertheless discursively allied itself with United States' state interests in a surprisingly overt manner.

For example, between 1908 and 1913, as the American film industry waged a struggle for tolerance if not respectability from the United States cultural hierarchy *and* for protection against European competition, it mapped out a strategy of discursive alliance with dominant national interests. Thus, beyond criticizing the French for the 'immorality' of their films, the American industry went about reframing its own activities in terms of the period's concerns with 'Americanization', arguing that film offered an efficient means to assimilate immigrants and to 'uplift' the masses (Uricchio and Pearson 1993). That is, the cultural effects of the medium and its potential power as an

ally of the state were heralded from the start of the medium's popularity.

This basic strategy has continued ever since, with the industry escalating the terms of its demands from domestic tolerance to United States political protection of the industry in overseas markets. Arguing that 'trade follows film', Will Hays[10] appealed to American expansionist interests after World War I by asserting that every foot of film brought in $1 in foreign trade (Thompson 1985). After the Second World War, the industry in the form of the Motion Picture Export Association sought to capitalize on denazification, and shortly thereafter, anti-communist programmes, in the process taking advantage of the inroads offered by the Marshall Plan. For their pains in conquering a weakened European market, Hollywood received millions in 'hardship' payments from the United States government.

The claim that film has the ability to produce certain desirable cultural effects finds its latest incarnation in the GATT 'free flow of information' argument. Such a position, while easy to attribute to opportunism, was in fact as essential to the United States economy as to the Hollywood film world, with motion pictures already claiming fifth position in the national economy by 1916. The government's aggressive market protectionism and even subsidy programs for Hollywood reflect its concern over the survival of an industry that by the 1920s could claim that nearly 40 per cent of its income was foreign derived. Particularly after 1946, when the impact of the consent decrees was compounded by a precipitous decline in domestic film attendance, Hollywood depended more than ever upon its overseas markets. Of course, the multinational corporate structure within which Hollywood operates today renders such terms as 'national interest' a bit obsolete, but United States chief GATT negotiator Mickey Kantor amply demonstrated that the industry continues to protect its markets in decidedly national cultural terms.

Intellectual response

If cinema has mobilized the sometimes competing interests of the American and European governments, it has also activated the competing perceptions of intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic. Viewed historically, cinema has effectively divided and thus conquered its numerous intellectual critics although, as previously suggested, the argument turns on different meanings of the term 'film', including its conflation with elite culture through the art film (and the problem of modernism) and often the national film as well. The appearance of motion pictures as a popular form of entertainment roughly coincided with sweeping changes in the organization of social hierarchies, changes which culminated in the class and taste reorganization apparent in many western nations by the end of World War I. The darkened rooms of the nickelodeon theatre effectively created a new public, providing a common experience to a diverse group of viewers and in the process displacing old social boundaries of gender, ethnicity, age, and to some extent class (Uricchio and Pearson 1994). In the process of this 'levelling', at least judging by the frequency of complaints, cinema also displaced certain established cultural authorities —clerics, educators, and even the paterfamilias. Not surprisingly, then, some intellectuals decried the medium that they perceived as a direct threat to their cultural authority, while others challenged it on the basis of the more general

charge that it 'weakened' established cultural values.

If the desire to retain power or simply maintain the *status quo* mobilized cinema's intellectual enemies, what of those who embraced progressivism and the modern? Although generally less antagonistic than their conservative counterparts, this group was anything but unified in its views of the film medium and its relations to modernity. In this case, the definition of modernity set the framework for film's evaluation. Modernism could be seen as akin to Fordism, that is, mechanized, rationalized, mass production; or it could be seen as abstract, anti-romantic, and highly refined. Modernism existed in mass cultural and elite cultural variants, and film served each side. A few figures like Charlie Chaplin managed to appeal to both sides, but more generally, a clear division was in place by the early 1920s between popular film (mass produced, emphatically sentimental, and quickly associated with Hollywood) and elite film (artisanal, intellectual, and associated with various artistic avant-gardes and 'European' production). Like the divergent visions of modernity they reflected, each had its intellectual supporters.

The result of these very different thoughts on the modern and the status of the popular has been an ongoing series of debates. On the left, the cultural studies community (celebrating the popular) has been at odds with the neo-Frankfurt school (critiquing its economic underpinnings and ideological effects), and on the equally contentious right, defenders of the cultural *status quo* have been at odds with those who embrace the logic of free market development. Although the position taken by any extreme has been seized upon by supporters or enemies of the film medium, in the end, the very divided nature of opinions have effectively fragmented and neutralized the role of intellectuals as a block in this particular cultural debate.

Economic consequences

If cultural arguments have been historically conflicted and thus weakened in containing the 'menace' of the American film, what of economic structures? The American motion picture business, particularly in its international context, has traditionally been driven by a simple logic. A huge domestic market permits massive investment, creating a high standard of production values (lighting, sets, costume design, special effects, etc.) and a consequent 'aesthetic' unattainable by smaller producers. While this perception provides an opportunity to evaluate critically the construction and implications of aesthetic tastes, the more direct lesson involves the structural difficulty for smaller producers to compete. Even substantial subsidies cannot hope to equalize the per film investment of major studios, a situation made worse by the financing structure of the large Hollywood films which permits them to reach the 'local' market at lower prices than those possible with domestic films.

There is, however, a price to be paid by the major producers. A vicious circle of ever-larger budgets requires ever-larger investments in promotion, ever-greater fixation with tried-and-true success formulas (stars, spectacles, formulaic narratives), and thus ever greater conservatism. But such liabilities are offset to some extent by factors such as the heterogeneity of Hollywood output (insuring wide market coverage), the financial gravity of the studios (as Hollywood draws world talent and stars), and the broad definition

of American culture as something not very different from what European cultural conservatives might consider 'entertainment'. The net result of these divergent tendencies is a highly adapted, remarkably successful organism, but one precariously positioned because of its very size —that is to say, an organism that has much in common with the dinosaur. Environmental change remains a deadly possibility to a beast of this magnitude.

European film industries have of course tried to use policy as a means to combat and contain the United States' industry (or, put more altruistically, to protect local culture), something of which the GATT stand-off is but the latest reflection. But these efforts, too, have not been without contradiction, particularly since Hollywood seems quite able to transform disaster into advantage. For example, on and off since the 1920s, various nations have attempted to use import quotas to stem the flow of American films, a strategy acknowledged even by Hollywood to be to its benefit. Quotas have encouraged American producers to make their own low budget films in Europe in order to obtain quota import certificates, a strategy which reinforced the perception of distance between the glamour and high production values of Hollywood imports, and the inadequacy of local (in this case, United States industry-backed) products. Moreover, the American studios used 'quota quickies' as a talent farm, seeking out Europe's talented directors, technicians, and so on for export back to the United States. European nations have also attempted to 'freeze' the assets produced by the exhibition of American films in their markets. The Hollywood studios, in turn, have reinvested the frozen funds into local distribution and exhibition operations, gaining ever-more structural control over local conditions. The long-term consequences of this policy have been disastrous for European filmmakers seeking screen space. But the American studios benefitted in other ways, including low-cost European location production, the talent farm factor, and ironically, local production subsidies —advantages compounded by special United States government 'hardship' payments such as the Media Guarantee Programme, which between 1948 and 1960 gave more than 16 million dollars to Hollywood.

The politics of despair?

There are, it seems, ample grounds for pessimism. The terms of the debate are hopelessly clouded; cultural containment policies are either contradictory, paralysed, or outmanoeuvred. Even the self-destructive potential of a bland and bloated Hollywood seems, almost incredibly, to have saved itself by redefining mainstream international cinema as a spectacle-intensive encounter with big stars and lavish production values. But there are some good reasons to challenge the assumptions that have for so long dominated the (national) construction of taste and cultural policy.

A well-known but somehow regularly overlooked issue regards the problematic characterization of Hollywood products as 'American'. While it is of course true that vernacular American English predominates, that something like an American lifestyle seems the norm, and that Los Angeles and New York continue to serve as industry centres, functional control of production is far more multinational than national. Today, as Hollywood maintains its grip on screen culture, Japanese corporations (Sony, Matsushita), French banks (Credit Lyonnais), Australian publishing magnates (Rupert Murdoch), and multinational soft-drink companies (Coca-Cola) hold controlling economic interest, marking a change from the American-based banks and investment houses which dominated not so long ago. Individual 'American' projects such as *JFK* and *Terminator 2* in fact directly benefit French media investors (Canal Plus), while Columbia's success with *Speed* (in part attributable to a Dutch director) benefits a Japanese company.

Even before American production moved from New York to Hollywood in the 1910s, films were produced, written, directed, and performed by multinational talent. Indeed, that most quintessential of 'American' film genres, film noir, is directly attributable to émigré German talent (and was critically 'discovered' by the French). While economic and production control fundamentally complicate the national status of mainstream dramatic narrative film, it is worth noting that national identity is further clouded by the legal fictions of local 'ownership' of multinational properties, a situation encouraged by tax laws. Hollywood may supply the aura of big budget glamour, but Hollywood in this case is not the same as America.

The point is simple: although national sentiments are mobilized to defend regional interests against an 'American' take-over, in fact the issue is one of multinational corporations *versus* cottage industries, of mass-produced, mass-consumed products *versus* artisan production. The implications for existing taste hierarchies —the threats to the *status quo*, the potentials for egalitarian access, and the shift of authority from a traditional social elite to a corporate elite— are obvious. The discourse of nationalism does little more than limit an effective analysis of the situation by directing our attention away from the most pressing issues. The GATT discussions offer a case in point. The very terms of the debate marginalized what are perhaps the next few decades' most important media policy issues. Not only are corporate identities increasingly difficult to tag with national labels, but their products exist more as textual networks (films, videos, CDs, comic books, tee-shirts) than as simple movies. On the technological side, the new distribution and delivery systems now in development pose an even more fundamental challenge to the vision of the medium discussed in the GATT. At a moment when 'video on demand' looms large on the horizon, discussions of quotas, even assuming that history's lessons have fallen on deaf ears, constitute an absurdity.

The postwar period has been one of convergence. We have witnessed economic convergence in the automotive, fashion, and food sectors. We have witnessed linguistic convergence, with English, the new Latin, as the common ground for members of the most far-flung language groups. And, as already noted, we have witnessed a process of transnational cultural convergence, whether 'high' (the music of Tallis), 'middle' (*Phantom of the Opera*), or 'low/mass' (*Jurassic Park*). The point is perhaps self-evident, but it has been effectively lost in discussions which pit 'American' film against 'European' film.

Few in the west would challenge acquaintance with the work of Bach or Shakespeare as an imperative for those making any claim to 'culture'. Indeed, the high culture canon has been remarkably transnational for at least the last century. But when popular cul-

ture crosses borders, it seems to generate suspicion and hostility. The historical record shows that the inconsistency is recurrent: the cultured elite know what is best for their less fortunate brethren, and more important still, they know a cultural menace when they see one. Beyond evident self-interest in preserving cultural authority, at least one source of this double standard relates to the fact that popular culture tended to stay regional until the turn of the century, whereas elite culture found institutional form earlier.

This developmental disjunction, where the new mass culture appeared bound up in the technologies of modernism, urbanization, industrialization, etc., and threatened to displace the older, more genteel elite culture, has somehow been reconstructed as '-Americanization', at least *vis-à-vis* the 'old world' values of Europe. This linguistic slippage also points to the quandary facing European filmmakers. If, as members of elite-identified and tradition-bound communities, filmmakers explore the 'high' culture side of their medium, by definition their cultural status will be regarded as (relatively) high and their box-office return will be (relatively) low. If they shift attention to the 'low' or 'mass' culture side of the spectrum, economic success is a good possibility whereas charges of 'selling out' or 'Americanization' are a certainty. But if they pursue the concerns of the cultural elite and attribute their modest audiences to competition from Hollywood, they have simply made a mistaken analysis.

The GATT talks fell into this trap, although, as suggested, the talks were obsolete before they even began. It is precisely this failure of the GATT talks that reveals the limits of the debate over the concepts 'elite', 'mass', 'America', and 'Europe'. Mobilized in order to rally supporters, twisted in order to serve very different ends, these concepts have served as sites for reaction and containment rather than as opportunities for insight and alternatives. They continue to be deployed in a manner that, while encouraging certain national policy objectives, obscures the possibilities for expressive forms to define new audiences. If we accept the terms of the debate as they are commonly used, then we will continue to stimulate an elite/mass polarization in the name of national culture, in the process, doing a disservice to a huge potential public and to our filmmakers as well. In Europe, the conflation of nation with cultural elite certainly brings with it the advantage that at least some sense of local culture will make it to the screen. But the question of reaching beyond an elite vision (and an elite audience) for more broadly held sentiments (and mass audiences) remains.

As an expressive medium, film has the capacity for critical contestation and cultural unification, for creative tension and variation as a source for cultural renewal. As a mass medium, it has the potential to share this process, reaching across islands of parochial interest by constructing new publics. By joining these two attributes and shaking lose from the self-defeating logics which have thus far limited it, the medium as a cultural force and site of local identity may have a new lease on life. Whether European filmmakers choose to embrace mass culture, competing with Hollywood, or whether they choose to develop the niche market already associated with them, the 'high' culture (art film sector) or whether they can find a third way, using the medium to reach outside the elite/mass dichotomy and address issues of collective national experience and memory —defining a new public in the process— remains to be seen.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Bart Hofstede for his detailed comments on the text, only some of which could be taken up in this revision.

2. This concept has subsequently been picked up and expanded upon by Lawrence Levine in: *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (1988).

3. Despite the 'overthrow' of many of Europe's aristocratic families by the end of the First World War, the power of social elites has in many cases been maintained in the cultural sphere. For a developed example regarding education and class privilege in France, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (1988).

4. The same could be said of the term 'Europe', which also masks a bundle of sometimes contradictory meanings; but as in so many other sectors, America's less refined connotations make it a more powerful instance.

5. James expressed his shock at the 'loud primary stage of alienism which New York most offers to sight', and lamented being forced 'to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien'. James 1907, pp. 82-84.

6. For a detailed discussion of this situation focusing on the period until 1913, see Uricchio and Pearson 1993.

7. As with any generalization, there were exceptions. The first years of cinema were, in some national contexts, associated with carnival culture, thus opening the medium to attack as part of a larger popular culture industry. Moreover, certain sub-cultures with an aversion to imagistic representation had an instinctive distrust of the medium. But even in cultures where these conditions thrived, such as the Netherlands, cinema also attracted attention as an emblem of 'modern technological wonders' and for its possible contributions to the study of nature.

8. The term 'independent' is particularly troublesome when describing United States production since its meaning has changed dramatically over the years. Moreover, since the reorganization of the studio system which took place in the wake of the consent decrees, 'independent' has been used to describe 'truly' independent films with budgets of several thousand dollars to multinational corporation-financed blockbusters of many millions. I use the term here to refer to those productions which take place largely outside the production, distribution, and exhibition context signified by the 'Hollywood' film.

9. The issue of an active audience creating its own meanings from mass-produced texts has occupied an important place in critical approaches to popular culture thanks to the efforts of Anglo-American theorists associated with cultural studies, and French theorists such as Michel de Certeau. Such considerations often approach popular texts both as processes of ideological positioning and sites for individual meaning and pleasures.

10. Will Hays, former postmaster general under the Harding administration, was appointed as the first head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the Hollywood trade organization charged with the self censorship of the movies and the political promotion of the US film industry. Although perhaps best known for developing Hollywood's 'production code' (the guidelines that eliminated the need for censorship), Hays' political network and lobbying activities were essential for the alliance of Hollywood's and the US government's interest.

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