IS AMERICAN CULTURE “AMERICAN”?  

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From the beginning of the 20th century, people abroad have been uncomfortable with the global impact of American culture. In 1901, the British writer William Stead published a book called, ominously, The Americanization of the World. The title captured a set of apprehensions—about the disappearance of national languages and traditions, and the obliteration of a country’s unique “identity” under the weight of American habits and states of mind—that persists until today.

More recently, globalization has been the main enemy for academics, journalists, and political activists who loathe what they see as the trend toward cultural uniformity. Still, they usually 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 competing voices in other lands.

Despite those allegations, the cultural relationship between the United States and the rest of 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.

In fact, as a nation of immigrants from the 19th to the 21st century, the United States has been a recipient
as much as an exporter of global culture. Indeed, the influence of immigrants on the United States explains why its culture has been so popular for so long in so many places. American culture has spread throughout the world because it has incorporated foreign styles and ideas. What Americans have done more brilliantly than their competitors overseas is repackage the cultural products we receive from abroad and then retransmit them to the rest of the planet. That is why a global mass culture has come to be identified, however simplistically, with the United States.

Americans, after all, did not invent fast food, amusement parks, or the movies. Before the Big Mac, there were fish and chips. Before Disneyland, there was Copenhagen’s Tivoli Gardens (which Walt Disney used as a prototype for his first theme park in Anaheim, California, a model later re-exported to Tokyo and Paris). And in the first two decades of the 20th century, the two largest exporters of movies around the world were France and Italy.

**THE INFLUENCE OF MODERNISM**

So, the origins of today’s international entertainment cannot be traced only to P.T. Barnum’s circuses or Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. The roots of the new global culture lie as well in the European modernist assault, in the early 20th century, on 19th-century literature, music, painting, and architecture—particularly in the modernist refusal to honor the traditional boundaries between high and low culture. Modernism in the arts was improvisational, eclectic, and irreverent. Those traits have also been characteristic of American popular culture.

The artists of the early 20th century also challenged the notion that culture was a means of intellectual or moral improvement. They did so by emphasizing style and craftsmanship at the expense of philosophy, religion, or ideology. 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 was mainly a European affair, it inadvertently accelerated the growth of mass culture in the United States. 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 an already-existing appetite (especially among the immigrant audiences in the United States) for “low-class,” disreputable nickelodeon and vaudeville shows. Stravinsky’s experiments with unorthodox, atonal music validated the rhythmic innovations of American jazz.

Modernism provided the foundations for a genuinely new culture. But the new culture turned out to be neither modernist nor European. Instead, American artists transformed an avant-garde project into a global phenomenon.

**POP CULTURE POTPOURRI**

It is in popular culture that the reciprocal relationship between America and the rest of the world can best be seen. There are many reasons for the ascendancy of American mass culture. Certainly, the ability of American-based media conglomerates to control the production and distribution of their products has been a major stimulus for the worldwide spread of American entertainment. But the power of American capitalism is not the only, or even the most important, explanation for the global popularity of America’s movies and television shows.

The effectiveness of English as a language of mass
communications has been essential to the acceptance of American culture. Unlike German, Russian, or Chinese, the simpler structure and grammar of English, along with its tendency to use shorter, less abstract words and more concise sentences, are all advantageous for the composers of song lyrics, ad slogans, cartoon captions, newspaper headlines, and movie and TV dialogue. English is thus a language exceptionally well suited to the demands and spread of American mass culture.

Another factor is the international complexion of the American audience. 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, mass-circulation magazines, and the television networks have had to learn how to speak to a variety of groups and classes at home. This has given them the techniques to appeal to an equally diverse audience abroad.

One important way that the American media have succeeded in transcending internal social divisions, national borders, and language barriers is by mixing up cultural styles. American musicians and composers have followed the example of modernist artists like Picasso and Braque in drawing on elements from high and low culture. Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and Leonard Bernstein incorporated folk melodies, religious hymns, blues and gospel songs, and jazz into their symphonies, concertos, operas, and ballets. Indeed, an art form as quintessentially American as jazz evolved during the 20th century into an amalgam of African, Caribbean, Latin American, and modernist European music. This blending of forms in America’s mass culture has enhanced its appeal to multiethnic domestic and international audiences by capturing their different experiences and tastes.

**European Influences on Hollywood**

Nowhere are foreign influences more unmistakable than in the American movie industry. For better or worse, Hollywood became, in the 20th century, the cultural capital of the modern world. But it was never an exclusively American capital. Like past cultural centers—Florence, Paris, Vienna—Hollywood has functioned as an international community, built by immigrant entrepreneurs and drawing on the talents of actors, directors, writers, cinematographers, editors, composers, and costume and set designers from all over the world.

Moreover, during much of the 20th century, American moviemakers thought of themselves as acolytes, entranced by the superior works of foreign directors. From the 1940s to the mid-1960s, for example, Americans revered auteurs like Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, and Satyajit Ray.

Nevertheless, it is one of the paradoxes of the European and Asian cinema that its greatest success was in spawning American imitations. By the 1970s, the newest geniuses—Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg, Woody Allen—were...
American. The Americans owed their improvisational methods and autobiographical preoccupations to Italian neo-Realism and the French New Wave. But the use of these techniques revolutionized the American cinema, making it even 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 style and formal qualities of a movie, and to the need to tell a story visually. Early 20th-century European painters wanted viewers to recognize that they were looking at lines and color on a canvas 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*—deliberately remind the audience that it is watching a movie instead of a photographed version of reality. American filmmakers (not only in the movies but 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 especially evident in the largely nonverbal style of many of its contemporary performers. After Marlon Brando’s revolutionary performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, on stage in 1947 and in the 1951 screen version, the model of American acting became inarticulateness—a brooding introspection that one doesn’t find in the glib and fast-talking 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. The Method encouraged actors to improvise, to summon up childhood memories and inner feelings, often at the expense of what a playwright or screenwriter intended. Thus, the emotional power of American acting—as exemplified by Brando and his successors—often lay more in what was not said, in the exploration of passions that could not be communicated in words.

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 meant 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 actor’s disregard for language, the reliance on physical mannerisms and even on silence in interpreting a role, has permitted global audiences—even those not well-versed in English—to understand and appreciate what they are watching in American films.

**Human Relationships**

Finally, American culture has imitated not only the modernists’ visual flamboyance, but also their tendency to be apolitical and anti-ideological. The refusal to browbeat...
an audience with a social message has accounted, more than any other factor, for the worldwide popularity of American entertainment. American movies, in particular, have customarily focused on human relationships and private feelings, not on the problems of a particular time and place. They tell tales about romance, intrigue, success, failure, moral conflicts, and survival. The most memorable movies of the 1930s (with the exception of *The Grapes of Wrath*) were comedies and musicals about mismatched people falling in love, not socially conscious films dealing with issues of poverty and unemployment. Similarly, the finest movies about World War II (like *Casablanca*) or the Vietnam War (like *The Deer Hunter*) linger in the mind long after those conflicts have ended because they explore their character’s most intimate emotions rather than 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 those films celebrated American values, but because people all over the world could see some part of their own lives reflected in the stories of love and loss.

America’s mass culture has often been crude and intrusive, as its critics have always complained. But American culture has never felt all that foreign to foreigners. And, at its best, it has transformed what it received from others into a culture everyone, everywhere, could embrace—a culture that is both emotionally and, on occasion, artistically compelling for millions of people throughout the world.

So, despite the current resurgence of anti-Americanism—not only in the Middle East but in Europe and Latin America—it is important to recognize that America’s movies, television shows, and theme parks have been less “imperialistic” than cosmopolitan. In the end, American mass culture has not transformed the world into a replica of the United States. Instead, America’s dependence on foreign cultures has made the United States a replica of the world.

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