

Franco-American Relations through the Cinema: Some Thoughts on the "Cultural Exception"

This is the story of an invasion without chariots, without fire-power but equally relentless and with equally ominous predictions of cultural enslavement. The words of President François Mitterand at the time of the last round of GATT negotiations in 1994, in reference to "l'exception française"—the cultural exclusion clause so bitterly negotiated—summarise the intent of this paper: he said "A society which gives up the means of depicting itself is a society that will soon be enslaved"¹. I shall examine this statement in the specific area of film production where the skirmishes are threatening to become all-out war. In the year of the celebration of the hundred years of cinema, we might almost call it a hundred years war because the confrontation between France and the USA over film production has been there, however spasmodically, from the beginning.

The most recent figures issued by the Paris-based National Cinema Centre reveal that French movies performed worse last year with the home audience than ever: of the 126 million seats sold in French cinemas, less than 28% of them were in theatres showing French films.² From a purely economic viewpoint the figures are alarming for the future of the French film industry. They are perhaps more alarming from a cultural perspective. The loss there is less tangible but possibly more serious for the French identity. I should like to examine this loss in a very narrow and specific area, that of national self-representation in film especially as it is revealed in what I shall call filmic "rewrites" of French films by the Hollywood industry. This is one area of inquiry which reveals what might be lost if the French film industry went the way of the British and Italian industries.

As this paper represents the beginning of my work in this area, I shall use only one film to illustrate my point—Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* remade as *Breathless* by director Jim McBride—but before looking at the films themselves some preliminary historical overview is useful to contextualize the debate. As early as 1926 we read the following from an American analyst who was fully aware of the impact of movies in changing cultural profiles and creating images of desire: "The peoples of many countries now consider America as the arbiter of manners, fashions, sports, customs and standards of living. If it were not for the barrier we have established, there is no doubt that the American movies would be bringing us a flood of the immigrants. As it is, in a vast number of instances, the desire to come to this country is thwarted, and the longing to emigrate is changed into a desire to imitate."³ This, accompanied by a statement by Marcel Braunschweig in 1931, tells us how early the battle for culture had begun in the area of cinema: "film is in the process of Americanizing the world".⁴ As we look cursorily at the history of French cinema we can detect a pattern of intrusion by the American film industry into France. The greatest inroads are usually made at moments of greatest weakness, coinciding with the great wars and with moments of disorientation and indecision, as at present. What is sobering too, is to see how the French response to the perceived danger has been predictably the same over the years.

The current crisis seems to be cyclical. Up until the first World War one could say that film was a French industry. After the early artisan period of production represented by the Lumière brothers and Georges Méliès, film corporations, spear-headed by Pathé frères, were set up which were as powerful as their American counterparts. Foreign exchanges were established for distribution in Germany and Russia and later in the USA. Pathé had studios in Jersey City. Gaumont followed and boasted the world's largest studio at Buttes Chaumont, the largest cinema, the Gaumont Palace, and agencies around the world. It is estimated, perhaps unreliably, that before the war 90% of films distributed were French but by 1919 only 10% to 15% projected in Paris alone were French. Most American films seen in France were initially distributed by French distributors

like Pathé and Aubert but even before 1914 their position had been eroded and both Vitagraph and Biograph had offices in Paris. French production dropped to 30% of world production and it is thought that the effect of the war was to encourage the taste for the escapist entertainment provided by the American industry. There is a curious echo at the present time. A Parisian filmgoer quoted in the recent press claimed: "French films are not showbusiness. And at 45ff a seat you don't want to be bored".⁵ The current big seller in Paris is *The Lion King*. France then, as now, was in danger of becoming a cinematic colony. Its solutions then, as now, took two forms: to imitate and associate. Attempts were made to associate, as exemplified by the short-lived arrangement between Diamant-Berger and Adolph Zukor. Or to imitate: independent producers went the route of blockbuster super-production in competition with the Americans but only one notable success emerged, *L'Atlantide* by Jacques Feyder. By 1922 super-productions were in doubt and the most successful attempts at regenerating the French film industry came through small independent companies working on low budgets assigned to a particular director such as Louis Delluc the director of the landmark film, *Fièvre*.

After the second World War, a similar crisis arose. Films were among the export commodities which figured in the general agreement of conditions surrounding the granting of Marshall Aid for post-war reconstruction, foreshadowing the desire on the part of the Americans to include cultural products in the GATT negotiations that are still being debated today. A share of box-office receipts seems to be the current target for American negotiators, receipts which provide in the form of taxes some of the revenue devoted to subsidising the French industry, subsidies being the most recent advantage the French industry clings to in its hopes to ward off American encroachment.

Several subsidy arrangements have been tried since the second World War with mixed results. The First Plan (1947-50) resulted in the creation of the Centre national de cinématographie which provided an 'aide automatique' derived from a proportion of production and exhibition profits to be ploughed back to ensure the next production provided it was French. Volume of production increased but not quality and audiences

for French film declined. In 1953 a "Fonds de développement" was created providing selective aid for projects that were French and of a kind to serve the cause of cinema and to open new perspectives in the art of cinematography. The educational value of film was affirmed. Finally, in 1959, a new system based on a "Fonds de soutiens" emerged consisting of an advance on receipts, interest free loans on the basis of an outline, which were repayable if a film made a profit. This system started the careers of some of France's most distinguished film-makers such as Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Chris Marker. The so-called 'art film' somewhat counterbalanced the invasion of American spectators. Unfortunately, nowadays, the whole notion of 'art film' is being used by people like Jack Valenti, the head of the American academy, to cordon off a certain kind of independent vision by suggesting that it is a cinema for a small, élite, well-heeled audience. At all events, by the seventies the industry was again in recession. Consolidation of distribution led to less and less variety and television began to benefit from subsidy for film production. This chronic complaint suffered by the French industry and sketched out in the foregoing survey suggests that a new plan is necessary and some form of protectionism will be envisaged as part of the GATT resolutions in spite of the fierce opposition of American negotiators. Among French film people it has become a burning issue and with the rise of new nationalisms, politicians are taking heed. It is no surprise then to hear Prime Minister Balladur stating that "we cannot accept that the fundamental values of our traditions of our culture and our civilisation should be treated like ordinary commercial goods".⁶

What effect has all this had on the product itself? and what are the dangers posed from a political and artistic standpoint? These quotations are more difficult to answer. Some preliminary and superficial observations can be made. In the average small French town the exhibition of French films constitutes a small percentage of the whole. One sees appearing a number of super-productions to compete, with the Americans (an echo from the past) which have varied success and deplete the limited resources available. Films like costume dramas *Germinal*, *La Reine Margot*, and *Le Colonel Chabert* (bringing back memories of

'le film d'art' of the twenties), or historical reconstructions like *Indochine*, *Pétain*, etc. *Germinal*, based on Zola's great novel, cost as much as an American blockbuster but was the object of some derision when it was called variously by the newspaper *Libération*, 'un film ethno-musée des arts et traditions populaires', or less respectfully, 'dézolant', 'détournement de mineurs' etc.⁷ These films while dealing with French history, or based on French classics do not necessarily reflect French consciousness as they are aimed at a wider and more profitable international market with the predictable result that they end up speaking blandly to no particular audience. And here we come to the crux of the matter. As the philosopher Régis Debray is quoted as saying in response to the American assertion that the French are good at food, wine and clothes: "one does not grow to resemble what one eats but one always ends up looking like what one reads and sees",⁸ which returns us to the central question of how we depict ourselves, represent ourselves and how we tell our own cultural stories.

The Merchant-Ivory films, coincidentally directed by an American director, are viewed by many as presenting a false and often glamourized view of England, an antidote to which would be the films of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. Similarly, in France, the antidotes are needed, provided by an independent film industry. When imitating or giving the customer what he or she wants, that is, a certain view of France, a culture becomes enslaved by myths created about it by outsiders and the myths become dominant, and no longer active in describing the destiny and story of the French people. It is the danger of having one's own story rewritten for economic purposes. In order to examine this cultural phenomenon through the cinema I have chosen to focus on a film which in its own limited way seems to disrupt the 'American' narrative in France and once rewritten by an American re-make loses its original thrust. Speculatively, I suggest that this may be one way of gauging the loss of cultural identity that might be incurred should the French film industry be lost in the struggle for the film market to the American monopoly.

The film I have chosen to focus on is Jean-Luc Godard's *A Bout de souffle*, his first feature, therefore carrying none of the

overt political agendas of some of his later films. The French New Wave while rediscovering the American cinema did its own refurbishing of American genres. But I suggest that Godard's film carries even at this early stage in his career the contradictions which are abundant in the culture itself and which are erased in the 1983 American re-make by Jim McBride. In an often quoted quip, Godard when asked whether he believed in a beginning, middle and end in his films, replied 'yes, but not necessarily in that order'. One of the points of this, of course, is that narrative structure, or the ordering of a film's reality does not necessarily have to follow the usual causal and sequential movement to its denouement. Even in this early Godard loosely based on classic American film noir, the classic narrative is disrupted and a sub-text emerges which is full of contradiction, and in which a number of Godard's later political concerns can be seen in germ.

In superimposing the two films we can discover what has been suppressed in the original film. In other words, it affords the opportunity to gauge what a monopolistic film culture might accomplish in colonising the national consciousness of a people. Of course, I am not suggesting a dark and sinister plot but simply that the loss for the French (or for any culture) of a voice to tell its own story, and images to represent itself has excited such passion within the French industry because more than economics is at stake. In this comparison I shall not attempt full readings of the films but merely suggest a number of areas where the films differ in revealing ways. Godard's film while telling the story of a small-time crook on the run as does McBride's also deals with issues which are neglected in the American film. Godard's central character, Michel Poiccard, models himself on an American movie hero Humphrey Bogart, imitates his gestures, gazes at his image in mirror-like fascination and to some degree loses himself in this obsession. In perhaps obvious symbolism the imitation illustrates Debray's point about how we come to resemble what we see. Michel's struggle for self-definition in his confrontations with his American mistress informs the film throughout resulting in curious riffs, as for example in the extensive scene in Patricia's hotel room which suspends for some time the advance of the narrative

movement as we lose sight of Michel's attempt to elude the police pursuit while matters of national and gender difference are discussed. McBride's film fails to foreground these matters. Instead, the room becomes an arena for sexual encounter and male dominance. The clash of cultures evident in the French film does not appear in McBride's where the whole preoccupation with language and incommunication across cultural lines is also suppressed. For a film which ostensibly is no more than a love story in the 'film noir' tradition complete with gangster hero and femme fatale, *A bout de souffle* allots an unusual amount of time to discussions of language and the final shot of the film in particular is very informative in this respect. Godard's film ends with Poiccard, weary and existentially despairing, allowing himself to be ignominiously shot in the back by the police. Having collapsed in the street, Patricia stands over him and he says "tu es vraiment dégueulasse!"—"you are really disgusting"—she asks the unanswered question what 'dégueulasse' means and the camera stays framed in medium close-up on her face and cuts to black. Michel has dropped out of the frame and out of her like and the final problem of language remains unresolved, alluding to a problematic contained in the sub-text of the film. The final shot in McBride's film is quite different.

Godard's film ends on the following dynamic: Poiccard stumbles along the street in a pastiche-like melodramatic death, accompanied by the jazz motif that has punctuated the film throughout. He collapses and dies at Patricia's feet out of frame; she gazes blank-faced and seemingly indifferent into the camera. It is the death of an outsider and anti-hero. McBride's *Breathless* has a very different 'take' on the ending. Even though the American film is very faithful to the plot of its French predecessor it reads oppositely. The protagonist is viewed in his last moments by his female companion but in this case she disappears first into the background and then out of the frame leaving the hero to fully assume his heroic not to say triumphant end as he turns with his gun to confront the police. The final freeze-frame captures him in a defiant macho stance like the gun-fighters of old, leaving behind the trace of an icon of courage and stern resistance. The message, needless to say, tells

a different story. The French one, is consonant with its time, in the disaffection and failed dreams of the post-war period, the other reprises the myth that even in death there is triumph over adversity. There are no value judgments intended here; I merely note the difference as, too, with the representation of the two women in the two films. In the French version Patricia is a complex character and her decision to betray her lover to the police is not, to my mind, fully explained. She says she does so because she does not want to love him, but the full implication is that she wishes to take control of her own story and escape from his at whatever cost. This would certainly be coincident with the view of women in Godard's other films even one so early as *Vivre sa vie* where the prostitute assumes fully the choices she has made. In the American *Breathless* the young woman remains written into the male story, an accessory to it.

I realise that what I have given is a very selective view of the two films. However, the more one looks at American re-makes of French prototypes, and there are a number such as Renoir's *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, 'americanized' as *Down and out in Beverly Hills*, the more one detects in the changes a suppression of part of the French 'story'. Clearly, although the French thrust towards protectionism is not solely motivated by artistic and cultural concerns, the film industry remains one of the areas where cultural erosion can be stemmed. With the promise of the proliferation of satellite television channels, television will become flooded by the American product unless the European industries can maintain production, and television is much harder to monitor. Already American film has provided a convenient store-window for the selling of American culture—one has only to witness the homogenization of youth styles throughout Europe. The French public is partly to blame in all of this, of course, especially in their appetite for escapist entertainment—the success of *Jurassic Park* and *The Lion King* attest to that. This is acknowledged by the secretary of the Federation of European Film Directors (FERA): "We have allowed the Americans to take over because we have been too splintered, too diverse and governments never really saw the film industry as a job sector, which is how the Americans have always seen it".⁹ With some 2.6 million people employed directly or indi-

rectly in the audiovisual sector across Europe and the share of film distribution going more and more to the Americans (85% in Germany, 90% in Britain, etc.), one understands why the French are determined to cling to their 30% share of the market. Beyond all these figures, however, the impact in terms of loss of self-representation, the erosion of cultural myths is harder to quantify. Here, perhaps a Canadian parenthesis is permissible. There is talk in film circles and in film publications of a Canadian New Wave, with directors like Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Patricia Rozzema, Jeremy Podeswa leading the way. Their voice is distinctive and is refreshing to hear in a country flooded by American images and threatened more directly in the trade agreements by American invasion. In the present shifting world, cultural continuity is often assured by the way we see ourselves and, as Godard and his companions of the French New Wave found, film, especially in its independence of voice and vision contributed massively to the freedom which President Mitterand so rightly puts at the centre of the French fight for "l'exception culturelle".

* This paper is based on a talk given to the Society of Mediterranean Studies at the University of Toronto in March 1994 and still carries some of the marks of its original oral presentation.

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NOTES

- 1 *The London Observer* 24 October 1993: 14.
- 2 *The London Observer* 12 March 1995: 19.
- 3 Quoted in Richard Abel *French Cinema: the First Wave, 1915-29*, (Princeton University Press, 1984): 38. Much of my historical background material is derived from this essential work.
- 4 Abel 38.
- 5 *The London Observer* 12 March 1995: 19.
- 6 *The London Observer* 24 October 1993: 14.
- 7 *Libération* 29 September 1993: 33.
- 8 Quoted by Michel Ciment, "Wide Angle on Europe's cinema crisis", in the *London Observer* 12 December 1993: 5.
- 9 *The Guardian* 19 February 1994: 27.