Three decades after “New Wave” directors Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer captivated the world with a revolutionary style and an uncompromising vision, the French film industry is in a state of crisis. No longer a dominant cinematic force even in its own country, the proud inventors of filmed entertainment sit aghast as Hollywood siphons millions of francs out of its citizens’ pockets and lures away the country’s promising young talent. At a time when bold new American directors like Quentin Tarantino, Larry Clark and Tom DiCillo are pushing French film out of the art houses where it once reigned, the audience for foreign language features in the United States is graying and not being replenished. Unless French filmmakers switch reels and begin to make movies that the global marketplace demands, the country that produced classic motion pictures like “L’Année Dernière à Marienbad,” “Jules et Jim” and “Jean de Florette” will become just another ancillary market.
The "hot" issue that keeps diplomatic negotiators up all night and frequently threatens to derail trade talks between France and the United States is not high-technology, agriculture subsidies or weapons sales. It's movies.

And while it may sound philistine in many circles to even suggest that cinema be considered a medium of commerce rather than a platform for artistic expression, the numbers tell a different story. Today, 70% to 80% of the films playing in France are American-made, while the number of French films on screens in the United States flickers at a perilous 1% to 2%.1

Thus, with $8.34 billion2 of Hollywood studios' record $14-billion earnings in 1994 coming from international theatrical exhibition,3 the growing trade imbalance is a serious crisis—as well as a bitter economic, political and cultural flashpoint—for the French film industry. The issue is far more important than simply a debate over whether La Reine Margot is a better way to spend an afternoon than The Lion King. The fate of thousands of highly technical French jobs constructing sets, performing stunts, applying makeup, designing special effects and even pulling focus rests in the balance. In 1996 the American film industry expects to reap nearly $9 billion from theaters overseas.4 However, if French filmmakers could cut into just 5% of the American box-office juggernaut, they would provide a $630 million windfall that could be used to fund more production starts, establish sorely lacking economies of scale and develop new technologies that would make them more competitive internationally. Just as U.S. automakers must devise new strategies to compete with Nissan, Toyota and Honda, French filmmakers must now take steps to fend off Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Spielberg.

Import tariffs, ticket taxes, broadcasting quotas and trade agreements are not enough to protect the struggling French film business from Hollywood's gnawing sprockets and ever-expanding talent pool. Last year, 89 of the top 100 films distributed globally were American-made.5 Thus, the final reel of this international cliffhanger will decide who gets to program the images, language and culture that people experience in filmed entertainment. In France last year, market share for French-made films plunged to a record low of 27%, down from 35% the year before. Meanwhile, the existing audience for French film in the United States is aging rapidly and not being replenished. Educated American twentysomethings now spend their leisure time entranced by MTV's The Real

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World, U.K., computer games like “Doom II” and on-line “chat rooms.” When they do go to the movies, they’re more likely to choose Nick of Time or Money Train than Pigale or Les Roseaux Sauvages.

This is a problem that will only continue to have a negative impact on the market share of French film unless action is taken. If the French movie industry is allowed to fade to black, the world will be robbed of a rich and beautiful heritage that has more to offer than car chases, alien mutants, exploding buildings, psychotic arsonists or renegade cops. Ironically, however, on the 100th anniversary of the Lumiere brothers’ invention of motion pictures, that’s exactly what packs audiences in the land that spawned Seurat, Sartre, Boulez and brie. According to the entertainment-industry trade paper Variety, Die Hard With a Vengeance took in 52% of the Parisian box office, selling 46,513 tickets on its opening day last summer, while Hollywood films drew 60% of the French market. Three weeks later, Die Hard with a Vengeance had earned $194.7 million in Europe and was still number one in France, booking the only French films in the country’s top 10: seventh-ranked Noire Comme le Souvenir and tenth-ranked La Haine. Rounding out the top six that week were Hollywood movies like Congo, Batman Forever, The Puppet Masters, The Usual Suspects and Bad Boys. Meanwhile, there was only one French film among the top 60 here: the Martin Scorsese-sponsored reissue of the 1967 Catherine Deneuve film Belle du Jour, directed by Spanish-born Luis Buñuel. While French film is far more competitive in the fall, entertainment is still America’s second-largest export after aerospace, regardless of the season.

“If you’ve spent any time in France recently, it is obvious that the public likes American film very much,” says Patrick Oliver Berron, a senior commissioner at the French Embassy Trade Office in New York. “They have always been very successful even if you go back in history, with film noir and many American westerns doing better in France than they did here.”

**Dubbing vs. Subtitles**

French films fare poorly in the United States due, in part, to an unfortunate Catch-22. “The kinds of people who go to art houses in America to see French films are purists who don’t want to see dubbed foreign films,” says Chicago Sun Times movie critic Roger Ebert. “At the same time, most of the movie-going public in the United States is quite provincial and shies away from or has never even seen a subtitled film.”

While there are plenty of popular movies about France playing in the United States—witness Billy Crystal’s Forget Paris, Nick Nolte’s Jefferson in Paris and Meg Ryan’s French Kiss, all released this past year—mainstream American audiences generally avoid French-language films. However, this has less to do with French production values, which are very high, than with the fact that Americans are less inclined or likely to speak a second language. “From the point of view of the French public, movies from all over the world are ‘French’ as far as what they hear when they go into a theater,” continues Ebert. “They don’t have a problem with dubbing, and that’s why they think it’s an American conspiracy to keep their films out by not dubbing them. But art film fans in the United States feel French cinema should be experienced in its *version originale*.”

French citizens are able to see American films screened “V.O.” in Paris and other major city centers, but after 60 years of constant exposure to dubbed Hollywood films, French audiences now expect most films to be voiced-over. Of course, this dichotomy did not develop overnight. “American film took over during and immediately after the first World War, when Europe had other things on its mind,” explained internationally renowned BBC film critic Barry Norman. “During both wars France was fighting and afterward they had to rebuild, so American culture had a chance to spread very fast and become accepted.”

Then during the 1960s French cinema rebelled, throwing off Hollywood’s yoke to become the focus of world attention with the onset of la Nouvelle Vague or “New Wave.” Filmgoers all over the world were very receptive to the stirring, innovative work of *auteur* directors like François Truffaut (Les Quatre Cents Coups), Jean Luc Godard (A Bout de Souffle), Claude Chabrol (Le Beau Serge) and others who broke away from the formal story structures and camera framing conventions of the day.
Over the last 35 years, however, directors have so overused the once-revolutionary caméra-stylo, “camera-pen,” techniques articulated by the New Wave (such as odd angles, jump-cuts and 360-degree pans), as to make them appear clichéd and irrelevant. Since then, audiences have become so jaded that today the average moviegoer is conditioned to view film as “brain candy” rather than a contemplative exercise in the appreciation of art, culture or form.

“I think everyone, even those who work in the independent film business, has said at one time or another, ‘I can’t do a subtitled film tonight. I need an American or English-language film,’” says Anna Brown, operations director of New York’s Angelika Theater, the most profitable “art house” multiplex in the United States. “It doesn’t affect our programming, but it is a reality.”

As a result, foreign-language movies that require audiences to pay attention to subtitles underperform here because the public desires a passive experience. “They want to watch and listen, not read,” says Norman. “People think subtitles get in the way of a picture because they feel like they’re either reading or following the action.”

This perception has created a vicious cycle that affects the business decisions of American film producers, distributors and, perhaps most importantly, exhibitors. “We are very, very pro-foreign film,” says Brown, “but I would definitely say that right now it’s easier and less costly to pick up a cutting-edge American independent like [Kevin Smith’s] Clerks and get reliable success from it than to pick up an offbeat French or German film.”

To counteract this phenomenon, French special-effects companies should immediately focus all efforts on perfecting a technique for digital dubbing that would eliminate the silent lip-flapping and “dialogue bleed” that Americans find distracting. If U.S. audiences do not notice the dubbing or do not even realize the film they are watching has been dubbed, they will be more likely to pay the price of admission and judge the film on the merits of the acting, plot, characterization, setting and overall entertainment value. If America’s Industrial Light & Magic can convince moviegoers that dinosaurs still walk the earth and that Forrest Gump actually met with JFK, then French technicians using digital imaging and sophisticated American computer animation technology should be able to dub French movies seamlessly into English. So-called “superior dubbing” will provide a vehicle for French cinema to gain widespread acceptance in the United States and England among sectors of the population that do not appreciate subtitled foreign-language films. Currently, however, the funding set aside for dubbing, compared to allocations for production or marketing, is on the thin side of meager. Average dubbing budgets to convert an American movie into French are fixed at around $50,000. Digital dubbing may cost 10 times that figure at first, especially to achieve the precision American audiences would require, but prices would eventually stabilize as technology improved.

Remake Rights

For years, Hollywood studios have simply remade French films rather than pay to distribute the originals here. This year’s successful Hugh Grant family comedy Nine Months was scripted from the French Neuf Mois, the 1994 Arnold Schwarzenegger action comedy True Lies was adapted from its French predecessor La Totale and the 1993 Bridget Fonda spy thriller Point of No Return was a retread of the internationally successful La Femme Nikita.

“Only a handful of foreign-language films in the United States ever make more than $2 million, so sometimes remakes can make sense commercially,” says Cynthia Swartz, senior vice president of special projects at Miramax Zoé, a Disney subsidiary created to acquire and coproduce original, French-language motion pictures for American distribution. “A lot of French comedies, for instance, have a great central idea but don’t translate directly, so American studios redo them. Studios will also spend $10 million to $20 million just on advertising, which is usually more than the originals cost to make.”

In an industry in which 10% of the films generate 50% of a studio’s annual box-office revenue, the other 90% are actually expected to perform poorly or flop completely. No one sets out to lose millions, but it happens regularly. And since the average cost of producing and marketing a typical American film has gone from $21 million in 1984 to $50 million in 1994, film executives often try to limit their exposure by recycling scripts or story ideas that have proven successful (or at least shootable) elsewhere. Occasionally it works: Coline Serreau’s 1985 French comedy Trois Hommes et un Couffin was remade two years later by Disney as Three Men and a Baby with American stars (Ted Danson, Tom Selleck and Steve Guttenberg) and grossed $167.8 million in the United States. “Every couple of years they’ll get a breakout hit like Nine Months that will inspire the next cycle of re-
makes,” says Marcie Bloom, copresident of Sony Pictures Classics (SPC), the art-film distributor of the last three Academy-Award-winning foreign films. “In some cases studios will buy the remake rights before a film is even released in the French version. Or sometimes they'll just buy the screenplay [preemptively] and void the French version from ever being made at all.”

Richard Gere's 1993 Civil War romance was based on the 1982 film Le Retour de Martin Guerre, while Isabella Rossellini’s 1989 bittersweet drama Cousins, featuring Ted Danson and Sean Young, was derived from the 1975 French Cousin, Cousine.

“To me it just says that the stories are good, otherwise American studios would not be falling over themselves to remake them,” says Catherine Verret-Vimont, director of the New York office of UniFrance-U.S.A., an organization funded by the French government to promote French movies. “I'm not saying that our films are more sophisticated. I'm not saying that at all. It's just that the French versions would make money too, if the [big American] studios gave them a chance and promoted them as strongly as they do their own films.”

Remake fever shows no sign of abating. In July, Disney studios announced it was finalizing negotiations to acquire the rights to the French hit family comedy Un Indien Dans la Ville, which grossed more than $50 million at the French box office. Last year American singer Diana Ross announced she had acquired the remake rights to the internationally popular 1982 French mystery Diva from its writer-director Jean-Jacques Beinex for $1 million to $2 million. Morgan Creek announced last December that it had signed Basic Instinct femme fatale Sharon Stone to appear alongside French superstar Isabelle Adjani (Camille Claudel) in an English-language update of Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1955 thriller Diabolique. After the release of Jumanji, Robin Williams is scheduled to star in the American remake of Edouard Molinaro's 1978 comedy La cage aux Folles.

Yet, there are serious financial consequences for the French from this spate of remake activity: the only French nationals who stand to gain are the film's producer and, occasionally, its screenwriter, star or director. French film crews and studios miss out on millions of dollars in lost job opportunities, production experience and film library equity. “The French film producer probably gets a million dollars, easy, and laughs all the way to the bank when a big American studio comes in to do a remake,” says Gill Holland, liaison presse at UniFrance. “The producer of Neuf Mois, Anne François, also worked on the remake with Hugh Grant, and Jacques Bar and Jean-Louis Livi, who produced Mon Pere, Ce Heros, were involved in Disney's English version. But American films are all union projects, so the big studios don't use French crews.”

For this reason, French producers and screenwriters should not be so eager to sell off remake rights. The idea is king in Hollywood. Everyone is looking for a good story. Rather than pawning these valuable raw materials for momentary gain and allowing Americans to reap the profits, the French film industry should consider getting more involved with producing and shooting its own English-language remakes before American studios can pilfer its story concepts.

**Going Hollywood**

Flush with cash and glamour, Hollywood studios are able to attract top talent from every country in the world, especially France, where filmmaking is a revered occupation. Next year French heartthrob Vincent Perez (Cyrano de Bergerac, La Reine Margot) will star in Savoy Pictures' supernatural martial-arts sequel, The Crow II. Anne Brochet is now starring opposite American James Spader in the English-language Irish film Driftwood. Anne Parillaud and Matt Dillon will appear together in Frankie Starlight. French actress Emmanuelle Béart (Manon des Sources) will be headlining opposite Tom Cruise in Brian DePalma's upcoming Mission Impossible. Some do it for the opportunity to work with a renowned director, some take jobs in the United States for the worldwide exposure American films get and still others act out of frustration with the current crop of homegrown scripts. “French films... follow a basic formula: husband sleeps with Jeane because Bernadette cuckolded him by sleeping with Christophe, and in the end they all go off to a restaurant. How many times can you act in a film like that?” asked Sophie Marceau in a March interview with the International Herald Tribune.

More French studios should consider periodically hiring American actors to star alongside French actors in French-made, English-language films designed specifically for export to America. The Dutch-financed British movie Four Weddings and a Funeral, used this mixed-cast approach, with Andie MacDowell playing opposite Hugh Grant. The lighthearted romantic comedy was one of the big hits of 1994 and the most successful Dutch production ever made; it cost $5 million to produce and ended...
up grossing $52 million in the United States and $250 million internationally. A more recent example was Luc Besson's *The Professional*, produced by the French film studio Gaumont. The movie was shot in New York, in English, with French superstar Jean Reno, American actor Danny Aiello and British actor Gary Oldman, and released as *Léon* in a dubbed French version, preempting a Hollywood remake. The film cost Gaumont Fr91 million ($18.1 million) and was a hit in both countries, earning $18 million in its U.S. release alone and another $30 million from European and Asian audiences.

Projects of this sort would not replace all French movies, but could possibly provide a much-needed entrée into the heartland of the United States where "serious" revenues can be generated. Currently, the French film studio Gaumont is aggressively pursuing big-budget cofinancing agreements to produce English-language movies such as the upcoming $30-million genetics thriller *Experiment*, cofinanced by Paramount Pictures and Buena Vista International, and the $75-million science-fiction adventure *The Fifth Element*, with Bruce Willis in the starring role. Like *Léon*, the project is being directed by Besson and shot in English. Columbia Pictures, which is reportedly contributing $30 million to the budget, will retain domestic distribution rights in the United States.

Other French studios are taking tentative steps in this direction, which is shrewd, given that spiraling costs are making it possible for only the most internationally salable projects to turn a profit. However, French pay-TV giant Canal Plus, which pumped tens of millions of dollars into movies like *Murder in the First* and *Boys on the Side*, announced recently that it will no longer be an equity investor in American films, even though its *Stargate* proved to be a modest box-office hit with a $68 million gross. Canal Plus chairman Pierre Lescure and two lieutenants resigned from its U.S. partner Carolco's board of directors on March 10 in the wake of losses that took a $24 million bite from Canal Plus's 1994 bottom line. This move follows last year's announcement by French bank Crédit Lyonnais (which lost $2.4 billion after years of investing in MGM) that it would sell off its Hollywood assets by 1997.

**Audience Decay**

Meanwhile, the demographic group that currently seeks out subtitled French films in the United States is aging at a steady pace. "When you're trying to market French movies here you're inherently appealing to an older audience that grew up in the 60s and 70s watching them," says Bingham Ray, founding partner of October Films, a U.S. distributor of foreign and independent films. "That older audience has always gone and is still going, but isn't getting any larger and, in fact, is contracting. And as you lose people, there are now no young people underneath taking their place."

According to a report published last July by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), moviegoers aged 12 to 24 now make up 35% of the box office, and those 25 to 70 are the bulk (65%) of potential moviegoers in this country.

"The problem is adults are not habitual moviegoers like teens," says former Fine Line Pictures executive Ira Deutchman, now an independent producer. "Their leisure time is limited, and if a film doesn't make it into their top three choices of what to see, they won't see it." The MPAA reported that in 1994 43% of teenagers (12 to 17 years old) went to the movies once a month or more, while only 29% of adults (18 and older) attended with this frequency. "During the 1960s and 1970s, European movies offered America—indeed the world—a vision of freedom and liberation through cinema that fit in with the prevailing tenets of the sexual revolution, the antiwar movement, civil rights protests and many other political issues," says Bloom. "Now that you can turn on any one of 70 channels on cable and see the world beamed in live, European movies that might have given Americans the feeling of traveling or being exposed to different cultures are not as important anymore." The number of cable subscriptions in the United States blossomed from 8.9 million in 1980 to 50.5 million in 1994, with the average number of TV-viewing hours per week increasing in the same period from 47 to 51.

"The classic kind of art film, like *Germinal*, which was an adaptation of a great novel by Emile Zola, is not what's drawing people in," Bloom says. "The real problem is that when European films only cost $2 million to $3 million to make, they were able to make their money back in their own countries through regular theatrical release. The box office that came from the United States and the rest of the world was gravy. But as European
films have been forced to compete with American films, the production costs alone have soared to where you have films like *Germinal* and *The Horsemen on the Roof* that cost $40 million to $50 million or more. And if the producer of a French film knows that the most he or she is going to recoup in France is $7 million to $8 million, when they come to other territories they demand a huge advance on top of the risk the distributor is already undertaking for distribution, prints and advertising and publicity, which is often several hundred thousand dollars.”

SPC acquired Gérard Depardieu’s *Germinal* for North American distribution for nearly $1 million,27 but grossed only $445,986.28 “There isn’t a conspiracy among the American independent distributors to keep these foreign films out; we’re dying for them,” says Bloom. “But how many French, Italian and German movies are successful even in their own countries?”

To generate a future U.S. audience for French-language motion pictures, a new fan base needs to be seeded immediately. This could be accomplished by UniFrance-sponsored film festivals on college campuses all over the United States so students here will grow up to be French film ticket-buying adults. By also targeting American high school students who may not be college-bound, Gallic filmmakers can appeal to the uninhibited who may view French film as an elitist indulgence. October Films, which distributed 1994’s *Killing Zoe*, used a youth-targeted approach to promote *Le Colonel Chabert*, directed by Yves Angelo. “We were dealing with French departments and history departments in high schools all over the country—big cities and small cities—trying to expose a younger base,” says Ray. “We tried to pitch it to students who were interested in France, French language and French history because we had a film that depicted a particular time extremely well and very vividly.”

This laudable, long-term approach will not flower, however, until other studios follow suit and establish positive top-of-the-mind associations with young filmgoers. October Films paid $475,000 to pick up *Le Colonel Chabert* for U.S. distribution, but the film grossed just a little more than $230,000.29 “Our problem,” says Ray, “was that people saw it as something that was ‘good for you,’ but they didn’t want that ‘castor oil.’” Still, this approach most certainly provided part of the groundwork for building a new appreciation for French film.

Miramax’s *Zoe* Division is currently moving ahead with aggressive plans to finance and cofinance a handful of European productions that would screen here in their version originale. “We’re trying to create a brand name in the United States for French film,” says Swartz. “Zoe is about French film and nothing else. We’re going to look at the Sarasota French Film Festival and think of ways to highlight the visibility of that event. We’re also going to look at ways to make dubbed films work here. Obviously, we would use the latest, state-of-the-art technology, but we need to find the right film first: one with real crossover appeal.” Zoe representatives are now attending film festivals all over the world searching for this special French picture and are also in the process of negotiating major deals with French producers, Swartz added.

**New Threats**

Meanwhile, the exhilarating new wave of American independent cinema led by brash, uncompromising directors like Larry Clark (*Kids*), Nick Gomez (*New Jersey Drive*), Tom DiCillo (*Living In Oblivion*) and David O. Russell (*Spanking the Monkey*) are making it harder for new French films to find a foothold. “Twenty years ago French films had 5% of the U.S. audience, but since then American independents have been eating away at the market for foreign film,” says UniFrance’s Holland. “Art houses are now showing American alternative films like *Smoke* rather than *Grosse Fatigue* and *The Brothers McMullen* instead of *La Cité des Enfants Perdus.*” Angelika’s Brown agreed that more of her theater’s six screens have been occupied by low-budget American fare over the last few years: “The independent filmmaking world has grown substantially, so of course when you have progress in one area it affects another.”

Since theaters make the bulk of their profits on concessions, not ticket sales, theater chain operators vie to book the most salable films, often in more than one viewing room. American blockbusters last summer like *Pocahontas* and *Batman Forever* were released domestically on 2,500 to 2,700 screens each, an incredible figure given that there are only about 12,000 first-run screens among the 26,000 screens available in the United States.30 As long as five or six “big” Hollywood films can dominate 50% to 75% of first-run U.S. exhibition space at any one time, it is extremely difficult for more specialized fare to generate “heat” from audience exposure and word of mouth. Subtitled films take in 85% of their gross from a handful of theaters in nine cities: New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Washington, DC, Toronto, Seattle and Denver, according to Daniel Talbot, president
of New Yorker Films, the independent distributor of Mathieu Kassovitz’s Café Au Lait.

At the same time, European exhibitors regularly bump even the most popular homegrown movies before they top out to make way for the latest Hollywood blockbusters that promise more traffic at the box office. According to UniFrance’s Verret-Vimont, this focus on “megapictures” is driving out a legitimate class of artistic cinema all over the world: “The average medium-budget interesting film—which I think is very necessary for the development of new talent—unfortunately has a very difficult time existing right now. The competition, the media and the celebrity phenomenon are so intense today that unless a film is an “event” people feel they do not have time to see it.”

Adding insult to injury is the little-discussed tactic of “blockbooking,” an anticompetitive distribution ploy that requires French exhibitors to buy packages of lesser-quality American films in order to obtain a coveted hit film. Through this practice, U.S. studios are able to flood the European market and reap substantial marginal revenues from movies that might not otherwise find a theatrical engagement abroad. “It’s not the overwhelming presence of American films in France so much as the imbalance that upsets us,” says Verret-Vimont. “I don’t think it’s healthy for anyone.”

Film Subsidies

Because the French film industry receives significant government support, it has more in common with the sector of the American art world that receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts than with fiscally motivated Hollywood studios looking to squeeze every penny out of each market. “French filmmakers still want their movies to be seen, it’s just that they can end up being satisfied with a much smaller audience and a much smaller profit margin as a result of working in a very heavily subsidized industry,” observed independent producer Deutchman. “There will always be exceptions, but you can’t rely on those to run a business.”

Yet another Catch-22 is that if France did away with its subsidy system to make its filmmakers more competitive, U.S. studios would move aggressively to snap up the remaining market share during the shift to privatization. Furthermore, the subsidies are in place because the local industry—which in France is not centralized in any particular region—cannot sustain filmmaking on a grand scale. Patrick Olivier Berron of the French Embassy Trade Office pointed out that the French national identity has always been tied to the country’s film business. “That’s why, from a political point of view, we have always taken the position that the government has to, if necessary, intervene in this area to make sure that there is a French film industry. It’s important, just as other art forms are, as a cultural factor and as a civilization factor.”

Yet the auteur approach, which elevates the director’s personal vision above those of the producer, the film’s stars and even the studio footing the bill, could be French cinema’s greatest shortcoming in terms of bringing in gigant worldwide audiences. “Certainly there are directors in France who’ve earned the right to do whatever they want, but I think that the auteur policy may be going to an extreme,” says the New York Times’s Molly Haskell. “In France, producers don’t sit on their directors and say ‘Hey, this doesn’t work’ or ‘Come on, this is your own private fantasy, the way they would here’ to make something more commercial.

The French government should maintain (if not increase) its annual film subsidy budget, but direct 40% of the funds into developing a digital standard for dubbing dialogue and mounting an advertising campaign designed to reestablish French film brand equity worldwide. This way, the doubling problem could be addressed while simultaneously slowly weaning French filmmakers off of reliance on government assistance. The European Commission (EC) recently made a new attempt to bolster filmmaking in the region by establishing a “movie loan fund” worth up to $1.3 billion; however, this money needs to be spent with more of a focus on technological development.

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Culture vs. Commerce

In purely artless financial terms, a “good” movie is one that sells tickets. This may be a reprehensible position for French filmmakers to support, but as the old Hollywood adage holds, “moviemaking is show business: no business, no show.” American studios have become so successful because of their focus on recouping investment and earning profits. “When we’re talking about cinema, I think it’s largely a commercial issue and not a cultural issue,” says Dr. Peter Morici, director of the U.S. International Trade Commission from 1988 to 1993. “Globally there is a preference for what Hollywood puts out. We have a very competitive industry, and that is certainly evidenced by the amount of film we sell worldwide.”

Disney’s The Lion King earned $640 million during its prevideo theatrical run, 55% of which came from overseas box office.33 “Why does Germany make such great up-market cars?” continued Morici, now a professor of international business at the University of Maryland. “They have a knack for it. No matter how hard American automobile manufacturers try to make an upper-end car, it ends up looking like a Lincoln or a Cadillac.”

Ostensibly this is because in all business sectors there are aspects of competitive advantage that are intangible, elements that go beyond the creative talents of specific individuals or firms. But where should a creative industry or an entire country draw the lines between art, enterprise, entertainment and culture? “The film industry has always been an unholy alliance between businessmen and creative types,” says Deutchman. “It’s by necessity that these two groups have to work together and somehow reach an equilibrium. Businessmen definitely need to rely on talent, but at that level of spending it’s very hard to ignore commercial considerations.”

Of course, tempers are bound to flare whenever discussions of artistic sensibility and bottom line collide. “There is a reason that films, especially those that are so indicative of a certain culture, should not be treated like soap,” says UniFrance’s Holland. “It’s like talking about the difference between brie and cheese whiz. A movie like Colonel Chabert should be able to play anywhere.”

Possible Solutions

• Mainstream American audiences generally flock to movies that have six identifiable elements: brisk pacing (or at least quick cutting), sexual tension, graphic violence, intrigue, a novel approach to a timeworn fable and, whenever possible, a happy ending or “wow finish.”34 This may be a crass, contemptible rubric, but America’s top grossing films all have at least some combination of these basic elements. Luc Besson’s La Femme Nikita, which was a significant success in the United States, grossing $7 million35 theatrically and just as much, if not more, on video, included all but one of these cultural “essentials” in ample supply: the film was a spy thriller (timeworn story) about a female assassin (novel approach) who must keep her day job as a killer (graphic violence) secret (intrigue) from the handsome supermarket clerk she falls in love with (romance), while still contemplating a tryst with her secret-agent boss (sexual tension).

“One thing that audiences like—you can see it, filmmakers know it and executives talk about it the world over—is something that is familiar to them,” says Octobe Films’s Ray. “It’s a well-known fact that people don’t necessarily embrace the new and the original as readily as they will run after whatever it is that reminds them of something they really liked or have seen before. La Femme Nikita was an action film that really moved. It was like a Hollywood action film in French: sexy as hell and violent. It wasn’t exactly trying to sell audiences a story about Tuscany in the summertime.”

Anything purely visual or visceral has a better chance of connecting to mainstream international audiences than a more cerebral outing. “The easiest films to sell are action, adventure or physical comedy—things that don’t require a lot of language translation,” says Teri Ritte, vice president of international publicity at Buena Vista International, Disney’s overseas distribution arm. “Of course, a lot depends on the subject matter of the film. Sometimes movies are star-driven, sometimes it’s a topical issue that drives it, but generally I think a good story appeals universally.”

French filmmakers have these in ample supply, but if the massive trade imbalance is to be reversed, perhaps a few French films made for export could employ visual and dramatic elements that have proven successful in attracting mainstream audiences here. American automakers have had to manufacture cars with the steering columns on the right side of the vehicle for drivers abroad. The French film industry should consider occa-
sionally adopting a similar approach to win over ticket buyers in the United States.

- French studios, directors and producers should consider mounting a new marketing approach to promote the entire concept of French film, rather than simply emphasizing each motion picture individually. The island nation of Jamaica successfully nurtured its sagging tourist industry in the mid-1980s with a targeted advertising plan that said simply: “Come to Jamaica.” An impressive, 90-second collage of great moments from well-known French movies could be easily assembled into a “trailer” that could be featured with other coming attractions that run in art houses and mainstream multiplexes.

The opening shot of this industry- or government-sponsored trailer would be the well-known sequence from Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca*, in which French resistance leader Victor Lazlo (Paul Henreid) leads the patrons of Rick’s Café Americain in a rousing rendition of “La Marseillaise.” As the strains of the French national anthem swell in the background, the trailer would immediately crash-cut into color footage from the vibrant heritage of French cinema, burning the glory and spectacle of French culture into the brains of American moviegoers: a flash of Anne Parillaud firing a high-powered assault rifle out of a hotel bathroom window in *La Femme Nikita*, followed by a shot of mischievous children chasing hundreds of leaping frogs in *Delicatesse*, then a shot of Ugo Tognazzi sighing longingly in *La Cage aux Folles* and a quick three-second bite of Gérard Depardieu struggling against nature and the forces arrayed against him in *Jean de Florette*. The trailer would dissolve back into black and white for the moment in *Casablanca* when French actress Madeleine LeBeau as Yvonne begins to cry as she half-sings, half-sobs at the top of her lungs. The classic scenes in color keep coming pell-mell until finally the screen goes white and two words in red and blue come up in jarring “Frankie Goes to Hollywood” style. They read: “FRENCH FILM.” The moment is devastating.

- French production companies must establish more joint partnerships (like last fall’s Sony Pictures-Studio Canal Plus deal to produce English-language films by Europeans) with U.S. film distributors and exhibitors to give subtitled French product greater access to audiences here. Just as every Blockbuster Video outlet has a “foreign film” section, so too should American theater chains: at least one “house” in every American multiplex should be devoted to showcasing a subtitled French film to provide a hip alternative to typical Hollywood fare. This will be difficult, given resistance in the U.S. industry. United Artists’s “one-art-film-per-complex” has not been highly successful, according to Howard Lichtman, an executive vice president at Cineplex Odeon. Having one foreign-language film per multiplex does not work, he says, and the result is often one empty house all day. Rather, he suggests establishing mini-complexes with a number of screens showing foreign-language films in areas with a large target audience.

Hundreds of such “complexes” will soon be moving through the skies all over the world, now that the Boeing 777 is joining the fleets of major international carriers. Each passenger’s seat on the new plane is equipped with its own color, flat-panel television screen that can be used to view any number of movies stored in the plane’s film library. The French film industry should act quickly to form alliances with various airlines so its French-language movies will become a staple of each aircraft’s selection.

- Building more movie theaters in France is not necessarily the answer. In 1994 France had only 77.4 screens per one million people while the United States had 98.2 screens per one million people. Yet, the drop in French cinema attendance in 1994 from 133 million tickets sold to 126 million tickets sold was actually due to a lack of indigenous product. Only 28% of the tickets sold in 1994 were for French films, while the percentage of French films screened in France was 32%. However, motion pictures with a more contemporary bent like Mathieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine*, the unflinching tale of three fierce young Parisian teenagers, are attracting large audiences at home and abroad. “It’s a very powerful film in a street dialect even people who are fluent don’t always understand and it has struck a nerve in France,” says SPC’s Bloom. “We have a definite stake in there being more, better and more accessible French films. If French producers and screenwriters aren’t coming up with films that people want to see, then they could build all the theaters they want and they’ll just have a lot of nice buildings.”

- The 11% tariff imposed by the French government on all foreign (i.e., American) films, which amounts to $350 million per year by some estimates, should be used to develop scripts that are more in tune with the tastes of audiences in France and abroad. Currently the French film industry is becoming ossified and out of touch with youth. A recent study commissioned by France’s Ministry of Culture found
that moviegoing topped the list of leisure activities among those 13 to 23 at 53%, but since 1960 the average age of French film directors has gone from 28 to 55 years old. Last year, more than 85% of French film directors were over the age of 50. Since there are very few young filmmakers in France, young adults there prefer youth-oriented American product.

In light of the recent flurry of billion-dollar media and banking mergers, it appears the globalization of the film industry will continue. To survive on the world stage, the French must become far more competitive. Cinema as art can still be a revered concept, and low-brow commercialism may still be held in low esteem by critics or directors, but French films need to make more money if the industry is to survive at all. The day is not far off when the average film will cost $100 million to produce and promote, too expensive to allow producers to overlook "how it will play in Peoria."

Moreover, the United States stands to gain from an invigorated French film industry as well. On the geopolitical front, it would help diminish tensions and disagreements that have become a major sticking point in trade negotiations between the two countries. Two years ago, an American call for elimination of an 11% tariff on American movies played in French theaters nearly derailed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. At the last minute, President Bill Clinton decided not to prejudice the entire agreement by insisting on winning the point. However, conciliatory resolutions may not be achievable in the future. There is no doubt that this trade imbalance will continue to be a delicate issue in the way of future international negotiations.

American exporters of high tech would also be likely to benefit from a stronger French film industry as orders increased for computer work-stations and other gadgetry used to perfect digital dubbing. Likewise, Americans skilled in the use of this equipment would see an increased demand for their skills.

Finally, from a cultural vantage point, increased access to French cinema in the United States would inevitably influence "artistic" standards at U.S. film studios and among American viewers. While overseas audiences have shown a voracious appetite for American fare, some Americans complain about the quality of the scripts being turned into movies in Hollywood; witness the recent success of low-budget American avant-garde films at mainstream theater chains. As French cinema becomes more commonplace in the United States, cross-pollination will encourage even more American filmmakers to target thoughtful audiences.

The French have dominated world markets for bottled water, perfume and high fashion, an accomplishment that has required adaptation and a keen eye to changing market demands. By adapting to the demands of film viewers beyond its borders, the French film industry can increase its share of U.S. and world markets, even while raising the artistic standards for its competitors.

Notes


8 Klady, "Earth to Hollywood: You Win."


10 A term coined in 1948 by French director Alexandre Astruc, which literally means "camera-gen." It expresses the idea that cinema has become an autonomous art with a specific language of its own and is a legitimate mode of artistic expression. The artist who creates the film is the director, who also writes his own scripts and, thus, has creative control over the production. Astruc's ideas, expressed in the magazine L'Ecran Français, provided the foundation for the auteur theory of the French nouvelle vague in the 50s. Katz, Ephraim, The Film Encyclopedia, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1979).


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26 Franklin (1994, 13).


29 Reynolds (1995, 26).

30 Franklin (1994, 4).


33 Klady, "Earth to Hollywood: You Win."

34 J. Epstein, Casablanca, Scene #126. [Lisa: "Can I tell you a story, Rick?" Rick: "Has it got a 'wow' finish?!"], June 1, 1942, 73.


