Media and Identity in Contemporary Europe: Consequences of Global Convergence. 


It is quite possible that the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand is simply just trying to cool off, not shut out the world around it. But regardless, if you came up behind it without warning, it would still be spooked. This is the lesson learned from John Trumpbour's recent book on international film trade during the Studio era, and also from a recent collection of essays and lectures on the state of European media by Richard Collins. Each book draws on vastly different materials, but both arrive at the same cautionary conclusion—that the economic success of audiovisual media depends more on brawn than brains. Presumably the struggling ostrich is already aware of this. But while Trumpbour believes that history can teach us optimism, Collins is a little more fatalistic.

To begin at the beginning, Hollywood was born. And subsequently began a pattern of beating European media into the ground. This, as Trumpbour points out in Selling Hollywood to the World, was not necessarily because American movies were better, but because they benefited from structural advantages lacking in the European film industry, notably an enormous, diverse, and hungry market; a vertically integrated studio system; and rabid protection in the form of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). European cinema, specifically the British and French industries, naturally struggled to subsist, much less compete, with the odds stacked against them. The migration of audiences from Europe to America in the first few decades of the twentieth century created a buyer's market in the States and, increasingly, a seller's market overseas. But what was being bought and sold was not just entertainment, it was a new definition of culture and national identity.

Trumpbour takes great care to map Britain's and France's bids for survival, including Alexander Korda's earnest London Films, documentarian John Grierson's attempt to provide a dignified alternative to Hollywood pablum, and the French government's long history of protectionist intervention. Though France has been more successful than Britain in staving off Hollywood's reach, there remains an inherent cultural insecurity. French cinema, at least, has always had the defensive advantage of linguistic distinction, which no amount of dubbing and subtitling can completely blur.

In retrospect, one cannot help feeling a little sorry for European film and policymakers, knowing that they would be in for a lifetime of beating their heads against brick walls. Regardless of how many trade barriers they tried to put up and fistfuls of cash they thrust into filmmakers' hands, ultimately they were fighting the intangible ghost of "Americanization." Hollywood's success in the global market was not simply due to economic inequities or a better product (though it certainly helped), but due to an increasing and persistent curiosity about all things American, which the U.S. government took great pains to encourage after World War I.

Reading Trumpbour provides a fascinating context in which to place Richard Collins' Media and Identity in Contemporary Europe. A collection of speeches and essays from the past 10 years, the collection coalesces Collins' analysis of European media and its struggle to define itself in the wake of 50 years of American market dominance. If Trumpbour's story is that of how Europe tried to compete, Collins' story is one that details how Europe gave up and tried to insulate itself against Hollywood. Although France and Britain remain concerned about American cultural imperialism, they seem to be increasingly distracted by the desire to sort out cultural and economic boundaries closer to home.
A crucial point that both authors make is that global trade in media products is helped and hindered by language. Perhaps Britain has had a tougher time protecting its culture because of the commonality of the English language, and France has been able to hold out longer because of its difference. In his previous work on Canadian broadcasting (1990), Collins has successfully argued that it is often language that is the strongest determinant of cultural identity, not political borders.

The struggle to define a pan-European culture in the wake of Unionization resembles the pitting of French Canada against English Canada. Is Europe comprised of “distinct societies” or is it a melting pot? Certainly broadcasting policy argues that while culturally it is the former, economically the latter model is more beneficial. If anything, Collins points out, it will be digital convergence that will bring about the biggest changes, particularly in public service broadcasting (PSB).

In Canada, as in Britain, France, and other European countries, the biggest booster of national identity has been in the form of PSB. But Collins reminds us of the enormous challenges facing public broadcasters in this day and age—the tenuous line between editorial independence and public governance, depleting funds and eroding audiences, and the struggle to provide relevant, diverse, quality programming to compete with American network imports on every other channel.

The story of “how Hollywood took over the world” is a familiar one, but so are proverbial characters such as the sand-swallowing ostrich. Trumpbour’s history is thorough and revealing, and Collins provides the reader with an acute sense of the contemporary results of that history. Trumpbour’s thesis is more apparent than that of Media and Identity in Contemporary Europe, the latter evidencing more a trajectory of Collins’ work than an overarching message. But both books provide cautionary tales. In a sense, European broadcasting policymakers are like the ostrich, but instead of being hopelessly sandlogged, it seems to have its head up its own backside. And it is very, very dark in there.

Reference

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