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The Chronicle Review

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Does the World Still Care About American Culture?

By RICHARD PELLIS

For most of the 20th century, the dominant culture in the world was American. Now that is no longer true. What is most striking about attitudes toward the United States in other countries is not the anti-Americanism they reflect, or the disdain for former President George W. Bush, or the opposition to American foreign policies. Rather, people abroad are increasingly indifferent to America's culture.

American culture used to be the elephant in everyone's living room. Whether people felt uncomfortable with the omnipresence of America's high or popular culture in their countries, they could not ignore its power or its appeal. American writers and artists were superstars — the objects of curiosity, admiration, and envy. Today they are for the most part unnoticed, or regarded as ordinary mortals, participants in a global rather than a distinctively American culture.

America's elections still matter to people overseas. As someone who has taught American studies in Europe, Latin America, and Asia, I received e-mail messages from friends abroad asking me who I thought would win the presidency in November. But I rarely get queries about what I think of the latest American movie. Nor does anyone ask me about American novelists, playwrights, composers, or painters.

Imagine any of these events or episodes in the past happening now: In 1928, fresh from having written "Rhapsody in Blue" and the "Piano Concerto in F Major," George Gershwin traveled to Paris and Vienna. He was treated like an idol. As America's most famous composer, he met with many of the leading European modernists: Schoenberg,

Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel. At one point, Gershwin asked Stravinsky if he could take lessons from the great Russian. Stravinsky responded by asking Gershwin how much money he made in a year. Told the answer was in six figures, Stravinsky quipped, "In that case, ... I should study with you."

In the 1930s, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington toured throughout Europe, giving concerts to thousands of adoring fans, including members of the British royal family. In the 1940s and 50s, Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, and Charlie Parker often gave concerts in Western and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The Voice of America's most popular program in the 1960s was a show called *Music USA*, specializing in jazz, with an estimated 100 million listeners around the world. In the 1940s and 50s as well, Leonard Bernstein was invited to conduct symphony orchestras in London, Moscow, Paris, Prague, Tel Aviv, and the La Scala opera house, in Milan.

If you were a professor of modern literature at a foreign university, your reading list had to include Bellow, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck. If you taught courses on the theater, it was obligatory to discuss *Death of a Salesman*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

If you wanted to study modern art, you did not — like Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris* — journey to the City of Light (all the while singing and dancing to the music of Gershwin) to learn how to become a painter. Instead you came to New York, to sit at the feet of Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock. Or later you hung out at Andy Warhol's "factory," surrounded by celebrities from

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the arts and the entertainment world.

If dance was your specialty, where else could you find more creative choreographers than Bob Fosse or Jerome Robbins? If you were an aspiring filmmaker in the 1970s, the movies worth seeing and studying all originated in America. What other country could boast of such cinematic talent as Woody Allen, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg?

Of course, there are still American cultural icons who mesmerize a global audience or whose photos are pervasive in the pages of the world's tabloid newspapers. Bruce Springsteen can always pack an arena wherever he performs. The Broadway musical *Rent* has been translated into more than 20 languages. Hollywood's blockbusters still make millions of dollars abroad. America's movie stars remain major celebrities at international film festivals.

But there is a sense overseas today that America's cultural exports are not as important, or as alluring, as they once were. When I lecture abroad on contemporary American culture, I find that few of America's current artists and intellectuals are household names, luminaries from whom foreigners feel they need to learn. The cultural action is elsewhere — not so much in Manhattan or San Francisco but in Berlin (the site of a major film festival) and Mumbai (the home of Indian filmmakers and media entrepreneurs who are now investing in the movies of Spielberg and other American directors). The importance of Mumbai was reinforced, spectacularly, when *Slumdog Millionaire* won the Oscar for best picture.

What accounts for the decline of interest in American art, literature, and music? Why has American culture become just another item on the shelves of the global supermarket?

The main answer is that globalization has subverted America's influence. During the 1990s, many people assumed that the emergence of what they called a global culture was just another mechanism for the "Americanization" of the world. Be it Microsoft or McDonald's, Disney theme parks or shopping malls, the movies or the Internet, the artifacts of American culture seemed ubiquitous and inescapable.

Yet far from reinforcing the impact of American culture, globalization has strengthened the cultures of other nations, regions, and continents. Instead of defining what foreigners want, America's cultural producers find themselves competing with their counterparts abroad in shaping people's values and tastes. What we have in the 21st century is not a hegemonic American culture but multiple forms of art and entertainment — voices, images, and ideas that can spring up anywhere and be disseminated all over the planet.

American television programs like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were once the most popular shows on the airwaves, from Norway to New Zealand. Now many people prefer programs that are locally produced. Meanwhile cable and satellite facilities permit stations like Al-Jazeera to define and interpret the news from a Middle Eastern perspective for people throughout the world.

Since 2000, moreover, American movies have steadily lost market share in Europe and Asia. In 1998, the year in which *Titanic* was released abroad, American films commanded 64 percent of the ticket sales in France. Ten years later, Hollywood's share of the French market has fallen to 50 percent. Similarly, in 1998, American films accounted for 70 percent of the tickets sold in South Korea. Today that figure has fallen to less than 50 percent. As in the case of television programs, audiences increasingly prefer movies made in and about their own countries or regions. Indian films are now more popular in India than are imports from Hollywood. At the same time, American moviegoers are increasingly willing to sample films from abroad (and not just in art houses), which has led to the popularity in the United States of Japanese cartoons and animated films as well as recent German movies like *The Lives of Others*.

After World War II, professors and students from abroad were eager to study in the United States. America was, after all, the center of the world's intellectual and cultural life. Now, with the rise of continental exchange programs and the difficulties that foreign academics face obtaining U.S. visas, it is often easier for a Dutch student to study in Germany or France, or for a Middle Eastern student to study in India, than for either of them to travel to an American university. That further diminishes the impact of American culture abroad.

Crowds, especially of young people, still flock to McDonald's — whether in Beijing, Moscow, or Paris. But every country has always had its own version of equally popular fast food. There are wurst stands in Germany and Austria, fish-and-chips shops in England, noodle restaurants in South Korea and Singapore, kabob outlets on street corners in almost any city (including in America), all of which remain popular and compete effectively with the Big Mac.

Finally, cellphones and the Internet make information and culture instantly available to anyone, without having to depend any longer on American definitions of what it is important to know. Indeed,

globalization has led not to greater intellectual and political uniformity but to the decentralization of knowledge and culture. We live today in a universe full of cultural options, and we are therefore free to choose what to embrace and what to ignore.

I am not suggesting that America's culture is irrelevant. It remains one — but only one — of the cultural alternatives available to people abroad and at home. Moreover, it is certainly conceivable that President Obama will improve America's currently dreadful image in the world, encouraging people to pay more attention not only to American policies but also to American culture — which the Bush administration, despite its efforts at cultural diplomacy, was never able to do.

But it is doubtful that America will ever again be the world's pre-eminent culture, as it was in the 20th century. That is not a cause for regret. Perhaps we are all better off in a world of cultural pluralism than in a world made in America.

Richard Pells is a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin. His books include Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II (Basic Books, 1997). He is working on a book titled Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies, and the Globalization of American Culture, to be published by Yale University Press.

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