

# The British Culture Industries and the Mythology of the American Market: Cultural Policy and Cultural Exports in the 1940s and 1990s

by Paul Swann

*This article compares the marketing and reception of British motion pictures in the U.S. market during the 1940s and 1990s. In both eras, British filmmakers were captivated by the fantasy of conquering the American marketplace. They viewed their movies as a fundamentally new kind of product that made it possible to challenge Hollywood on its own terrain.*

December 30, 1948: 96 percent of America's exhibitors tell the *Showman's Trade Review* that they do not show British films.

July 1997: Prime Minister Tony Blair announces that more people in Britain work in film and TV than in the car industry.

The international consequences of American film and television programming have attracted a great deal of attention, but very little has been written about foreign media in the United States.<sup>1</sup> This article compares selected British motion pictures in the American market in the post–World War II decade and during the mid-1990s. In each time frame, advocates for the British culture industries were euphoric about their prospects in the American marketplace. Any discussion of the films themselves is soon drowned by the rhetoric of the market, Hollywood's own machinations, British assumptions about the nature of American culture, and, most important, the special commodity status of motion pictures. I will explore what the American market has meant—economically and culturally—to the British culture industries. I also intend to problematize the utility of national labels, whether applied to funding, production, or reception. It is striking how labels such as “British film” or “foreign film” have come to constitute a form of cachet within the United States.

**Motion Pictures as a New Kind of Commodity.** It has become a platitude that entertainment and software are the second-largest category of American export. When the first General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) charter was drawn up in 1948, motion pictures were given preferential treatment granted to

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no other commodity. In 1948, the term “trade in services” did not exist, and those who framed the charter, although profoundly aware of intertwined cultural issues and commercial concerns, lacked the theoretical basis for creating fully separate rules to govern the international trade in popular culture. They were, however, moving toward such a formulation. For example, motion pictures were routinely regulated by national quotas, which were otherwise anathema to the GATT’s framers. Quotas were the only way to standardize how the flow of mostly American movies was monitored and taxed at each importing country’s box office.<sup>2</sup> It was already clear that international trade in cultural artifacts could not be regulated as if they were hard, three-dimensional goods. As Ian Jarvie notes: “Movies were not just a commodity like any other, but they were a commodity, they were traded.... Events involving the international trade in films were a precursor of what we now call the international market in mass communications software.”<sup>3</sup>

The international trade community’s current commitment to free trade and economic nationalism is therefore at odds with postindustrialism’s transnational conglomerates and new trade goods such as entertainment and information. Both transnational conglomerates and cultural software can easily evade conventional regulations and controls.<sup>4</sup>

Not only has it taken a conceptual leap for economists and negotiators to consider that services are a tradable commodity but that they are worth anything at all. Adam Smith’s evaluation of service industries is as follows:

The labor force of some of the most respectable orders in the society is, like that of menial servants, unproductive of any value, and does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject, or vendible commodity.... In the same class must be ranked, some both of the gravest and most important, and some of the most frivolous professions: churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds; players, buffoons, musicians, opera singers, opera dancers.... The work of them all perishes in the very instant of its production.<sup>5</sup>

Following Adam Smith, many economists have generally regarded services as wasteful and essentially irrelevant to international trade.

For several years immediately after World War II, the British film industry and the British government believed that movies could make more money in the United States than, say, exports of machine tools or scotch whiskey. As filmmaker Harry Watt noted during Britain’s postwar “export or die” phase, “Films are perhaps the easiest and most profitable exports. It may take half a dozen large ships to carry enough Jaguars to America to make a million dollars profit. Ten tins of duplicate negative film, in a box measuring four feet by two feet, and weighing perhaps forty pounds, can easily earn the same amount.”<sup>6</sup> In hindsight, this was prescient thinking. Some Western economies have indeed moved away from manufacturing tangible three-dimensional goods and toward software production, although services do not yet dominate the economies of developed countries.<sup>7</sup> However, the U.S. has become the world’s cultural software producer while remaining largely immune to cultural imports itself. As Roberto Goizueta, the former CEO of Coca-Cola, once put it, “Hollywood, unlike Detroit, has found a product that the Japanese cannot improve upon.”<sup>8</sup>

**National Labels.** What do we accomplish by attaching national labels to industries or audiences?<sup>9</sup> “Hollywood” has been a label most people have no problem in applying, but it has never been clear what constitutes a “British film.” The term came to have tremendous symbolic weight in the United Kingdom. Is a film “British” if it is produced by a British national? If it is made with British talent or technicians? If it is made on British soil? Or with British money? Or based on British history or mythology?<sup>10</sup> For example, is a U.S.-funded film like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) a British film? Are *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) (British money but shot in the United States) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) (a British subject but an international co-production) British films? What about the James Bond series?<sup>11</sup> What about the Merchant-Ivory productions: British subjects and locations, mostly British creative talent, but currently underwritten by Japanese funding, distributed in the United States by Sony Pictures Classics, now part of a Japanese-owned conglomerate, and, most recently, partly acquired by Disney? When *Howards End* (1992) was broadcast on Japanese television, it was identified as a “British–Japanese” movie, which would make no sense to E. M. Forster but acknowledges the realities of modern international film finance.<sup>12</sup>

Identifying culture consumers’ nationalities is equally problematic. Hollywood tried to construct a monolithic, standardized domestic mass audience but has always had an essentially polyglot market. U.S. studio decisions have often been based on misconceptions about the nature of that diverse mass audience.<sup>13</sup> British distributors were equally slow to understand that marketing films in art theaters in major metropolitan areas or American university towns is a very different proposition from exhibiting them in neighborhood and rural theaters. The emergence of the multiplex theater, cable television, videotape rentals, and the digital domain makes this diversity even more evident today.

For example, “American” cable/satellite programming such as MTV commands major audiences around the world. Should these MTV viewers be counted as part of the American market, or part of the markets in their country of origin, or as yet another kind of market that has not yet been fully defined? Clearly, audiovisual markets are no longer defined by national frontiers.

Currently, the popular press sees an American predilection for imported hardware only partially offset by a global appetite for American software, while most economists continue to argue that services still take a back seat to manufacturing in terms of foreign earnings and domestic job creation.<sup>14</sup> Until quite recently, however, foreign capital penetration and imports rarely attracted much attention, primarily because the American economy was essentially closed to foreign producers of practically any commodity. With the exception of a small range of high-cost items, few foreign companies even tried to compete in America’s domestic market. Nevertheless, overseas manufacturers have mythologized the United States as a land of plenty that evolved into a land where there are plenty of consumers.

British producers have historically reached out to American consumers but, significantly, their products—Rolls-Royces, Scotch whiskey, Saville Row tailoring, and motion pictures—were aimed at an elite audience. British industrialists viewed the U.S. as a large market but had a hard time conceptualizing it as a *mass* or

*popular* market. This blind spot was in part based on the gospel of comparative economic advantage, which ostensibly explains how all trading partners profit from unhindered international trade. British producers were trained to believe that they had very little chance of competing against American mass-production techniques, so their only alternative was to emphasize expensive handcrafted items. Virtually all British exports are therefore sold on the basis of prestige. In 1955, Don Humphrey cited the case of clothing: “The average American has a wider range of fabrics to choose from when he buys a ready-made suit than does a Britisher who orders a custom-made suit.... Thus the Britisher does indeed have an advantage in exclusiveness but not in variety.”<sup>15</sup> A similar approach frequently characterized the handling of British audiovisual culture. Going after a segment of the American audience has been variously characterized as “a perennial pipe dream”<sup>16</sup> or clever niche marketing.<sup>17</sup>

In the postwar decade, British motion pictures were usually pitched in the United States as one-of-a-kind handcrafted productions, not the products of a factory system. An article in the *New York Times* reflected this mentality: “The relatively small number of British films which reach our shores has been a major reason for the high esteem in which they are held by the more thoughtful cinemagoer.”<sup>18</sup> The American trade press also fostered this attitude. In *Variety*, in which reviews were ostentatiously stamped “British made,” just as cheap toys used to be stamped “Made in Japan,” a frequent comment was that “this film needs special handling.” For example, in 1945, a reviewer of *Henry V* concluded that it needed “a determined pitch for the school and longhaired trade to whom a fine, artistic interpretation of the Bard is a really meaningful event.”<sup>19</sup>

Before the *U.S. v. Paramount* case was settled in 1948, vertical integration effectively banished foreign films from first-run theaters in the United States. As Thomas Guback has noted, introducing foreign product into the United States market disrupted the gains from vertical integration, so it was always in the industry’s interests to minimize imports.<sup>20</sup> As Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen’s study of Fox’s *Sunrise* (1927) demonstrates, Hollywood was adept at appropriating foreign film styles and talent while excluding foreign films from the American market.<sup>21</sup>

Circumstances changed somewhat in the late 1940s, when the Paramount decrees ended studio control over film exhibition. Studio spokespeople openly worried that divestiture would lead to an invasion of foreign productions, although their fears were ultimately unfounded. There were also frequent clashes between mainstream American values and foreign films, which were often collectively demonized as bad cinema: high brow, blasphemous, and immoral. Between 1950 and 1968, for example, of the nineteen major court cases relating to film censorship, only six involved American films; the rest were European imports.<sup>22</sup>

**British Films.** Adaptations of literary and dramatic classics, such as Laurence Olivier’s trilogy—*Henry V* (1945), *Hamlet* (1948), and *Richard III* (1955)—and David Lean’s *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948) were at the center of the post-1945 debate over British prospects in the American market. They were lavishly produced on the assumption that their negative costs could

be recouped in the American market and, in fact, drew good-sized audiences when narrowly targeted at “art” cinemas. This stratum of the film audience became increasingly distinct after World War II, as the consensus that had hovered over Hollywood fragmented and “films” became an increasingly legitimate art form, not simply dismissed as escapist “movies.”<sup>23</sup> British distributors were often bewildered when their films received excellent reviews but little income. A British film could become a really significant dollar earner only as a major American release and after being sold as a mass-market product.

Major studios generally did not distribute British films, which found their way into mainstream cinemas only by circuitous and usually unprofitable routes. In 1947, for example, *Bedelia* (1946), which starred Britain’s top female star, Margaret Lockwood, was released in the United States by PRC, a company specializing in low-budget “B” movies. In twelve months, it earned more than \$100,000, but the British producer received less than \$100.<sup>24</sup>

Figures for remittances and revenue were always vague and hard to interpret. When the subject of getting British films into American theaters came up in the British House of Commons, Members of Parliament were repeatedly frustrated by the lack of specific figures.<sup>25</sup>

**Good Taste in Technicolor.** How British motion pictures fared in the American marketplace resulted in part from straightforward product differentiation and from evolving high- and mass-culture paradigms. Lawrence Levine has argued that the high-low distinction is a historically recent phenomenon and was imposed on cultural production and consumption in the United States only at the turn of the century. Shakespeare, for example, was enormously popular in the nineteenth century, when fully one in five American stage productions was based on his work. Shakespeare became a powerful influence on America’s oral culture and was familiar to rich and poor alike. By the 1940s, however, when British filmmakers attempted to sell elaborate productions of Shakespeare, his work was firmly marked as elite culture. As Levine puts it: “Although in the mid-twentieth century there was no more widely known, respected, or quoted dramatist in our culture than Shakespeare, the nature of his relationship to the American people had changed: he was no longer their familiar, no longer part of their culture, no longer at home in their theaters or on the movie and television screens that had become the twentieth-century equivalents of the stage.”<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare came to be consumed as a respite from a regular low-brow cultural diet. *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* had become, to quote Gerald Nachman, “theatrical spinach.” As *Variety* put it, “Shakespeare’s renowned verse, except in occasional instances, is just so much overrated abracadabra to the kid from Brooklyn or the average film fan in Birmingham or Seattle.”<sup>27</sup>

Olivier’s adaptations led the postwar assault on the American market. The Rank Organization was convinced that what Richard Griffith castigated as “Good Taste in Technicolor” would sell in the U.S. and so produced a series of expensive spectacles aimed squarely at the American market. They were consumed primarily by individuals who possessed considerable cultural and economic capital. They were marked as high-class entertainment, which, paradoxically, British producers

hoped would also spread into the mass market. In fact, Olivier's productions explicitly mediated between mass and elite consumption. When, for example, *Richard III* premiered in the U.S. in 1956, it opened at the movies and aired on NBC television on the same day. It was watched by twenty-five million people in forty-five states—"more people on a single day than all the audiences that had ever watched any Shakespeare production in history."<sup>28</sup>

British film producers have always maintained that the American market was the key to their financial health, arguing that the huge domestic market was the reason for the American producers' profitability. At times, getting British films into American cinemas was as pressing an issue as getting Hollywood movies off British screens. Yet, during the last sixty years, astonishingly few British films have done well at the United States box office. If one looks at film listings in the *New York Times* at practically any point, one finds occasional advertisements for British films but usually only at a handful of independent repertory theaters.

Unlike every other national cinema, Hollywood always assumed that it produced for a global marketplace. Or as Spyros Skouras once declared: "The average good motion picture, with the exception of a few typically American subjects, has a universal appeal. If a motion picture meets with success in America, it is successful throughout the world."<sup>29</sup> In contrast, every other national cinema anticipated that only *some* of its output would be appropriate for international release.

**The Dollar Crisis.** British impresario Sidney Bernstein negotiated for each major American studio to take two British features a year for the duration of the Second World War. This was the only time that British producers had guaranteed access to the mainstream audience. As Sarah Street and Margaret Dickinson note, "This fed the old dream that British films would be able to compete with American ones even in the American home market. The performance of British films in America was, however, frequently exaggerated.... The signs were not strong enough to suggest to anyone except those who needed to believe it that British films were about to gain a commercially significant place in the American market."<sup>30</sup> This arrangement ended in 1945, when British motion pictures were once again systematically excluded from American cinemas.

In the postwar decade, when all British industries desperately tried to earn dollars, motion pictures were widely regarded as the perfect trade commodity. The British Labour government believed that motion pictures were potentially lucrative and easy to export. Chancellor of the Exchequer Stafford Cripps anticipated that films would "bring us foreign exchange in large volume, which will be a great help in our balance of payments."<sup>31</sup> The British trade journal *Kine Weekly* maintained that film remittances from the U.S. would "increase our dollar intake and thus give us the means of buying more foodstuffs, machinery and other items for our people at home."<sup>32</sup>

The Rank Organization shaped the reception of British films in the United States for almost two decades. J. Arthur Rank built a transnational conglomerate that rivaled the American majors. By 1947, he owned more than 60 percent of Britain's cinemas and more than 50 percent of its film-production capacity, as well



Figure 1. “King Arthur” Rank appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1947. Courtesy of Sullivan Memorial Library, Temple University.

as extensive holdings overseas.<sup>33</sup> He was the principal beneficiary of both the wartime quota system and a British government that sanctioned his monopoly power. Rank was a major stockholder in a number of American conglomerates, including Universal. His holding company was affiliated at one time or another with United Artists, Universal, and Twentieth Century-Fox, and he controlled Eagle-Lion, which, with Universal-International, distributed Rank’s “A” features in the United States. Less expensive Rank films were distributed by Prestige Pictures, a division of Universal. This offshoot’s name was unfortunate because, to quote one critic, “in Hollywood argot, a ‘prestige’ picture is one whose merits may reflect glory on its producers, but which cannot possibly make money.”<sup>34</sup>

In the summer of 1947, “King Arthur” Rank appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine (fig. 1) when he visited Hollywood on a mission to obtain a major distribution deal. This objective ultimately failed when it became entangled in a major Anglo–American film trade dispute. Punitive taxes and frozen U.S. remittances brought prompt retaliation from Hollywood.<sup>35</sup>

British films were marketed in the United States in diverse ways. The British release of *Henry V*, for example, was timed to coincide with the Allied victory in Europe, but it then spent two years in American film vaults before distributors worked out how to promote it in the United States. It was eventually marketed as a filmed stage play and was constructed as canned theatrical spectacle, not a motion picture. United Artists had only five prints of the film in the whole country and pursued what *Variety* termed the “academic trade.” In contrast, *Hamlet*’s tremendous word-of-mouth publicity transformed it into a major critical and commercial hit, and in 1948, it took several Oscars, including best picture. That same year, *Great Expectations* did well in New York’s Radio City Music Hall but died in the rest of the country. It is therefore no surprise that in 1950 a correspondent wrote from London:

A high degree of confusion exists in the public mind here...about the success or otherwise, of British films in the United States. Travelers of varying degrees of reliability return with reports of successful runs, rapturous receptions or cold shoulder tales—according to the trend of the reporter’s bias...we read of long runs, which fail to point out the small capacity of the “art theater” involved, are unhappily misleading.<sup>36</sup>

Rank’s American sales force pioneered many modern road-show techniques to market *Henry V* and *Great Expectations*. Their Herculean efforts were rewarded with only sporadic success, and Rank failed to gain a significant foothold in the American market. One reason for this failure was widespread anti-British sentiment after the film embargo. A more significant factor, however, was changes in exhibition and distribution practices after the Paramount decrees. American studios were no longer sure of placing all of their own output, without the added complication of foreign imports. Divestiture theoretically made it easier for British producers to gain access to American screens, but in reality it did not make much difference, since the majors retained control of distribution, even though they were obliged to sell off their exhibition outlets.<sup>37</sup>

**“Where Are the Dollars?”** British producers and their U.S. distributors often asked about their American remittances. At a time when as many as one-third of Broadway’s cinemas regularly played foreign films, British filmmakers had good reason to be enthusiastic about pursuing other markets. Or as *Kine* put it, “The whole structure of the British industry is dependent to a great extent upon the success or otherwise of our attempt to enter the huge American market.”<sup>38</sup>

It was very hard to distinguish among concerns about national origin, style, production values, themes, or even accents when the “British” label was applied to film imports. The British “accent” (as if there was such a thing) was not a trivial issue and was frequently singled out as a reason for the American audience’s antipathy.

Virtually all dubbed and subtitled films have historically performed poorly in general exhibition in the U.S., and British films were no exception.<sup>39</sup> For many, accents were inseparable from the “prestige” films that the British tried to peddle in the United States. Herbert Wilcox blamed British film producers’ penchant for the “highly artistic” film:

British films are not “clicking” with American audiences.... Americans have shown over the years that they want pictures reflecting the simple emotions. We are trying to crash into their market by offering them gloom-sadism-and-soft-focus. We must aim more at the box office and not the art gallery.... It is no good aiming over the heads of our audience. We must remember that is one of our greatest dangers.... We must get away from the art theater mentality.... Admittedly, it has given us a good press and it has enabled some of our pictures to chalk up long runs at small theaters. It has fed our ego to bursting point. But it has not resulted in booking dates in the Middle West, and it is not getting us into the industrial areas of the U.S. In short, it will not help us earn dollars.<sup>40</sup>

Theater lobbies in Iowa and Nebraska proclaimed British films to be “poison in the Middle West,” believing that “Hollywood’s worst ‘B’s are better than Britain’s triple ‘A’s.”<sup>41</sup> Exhibitors claimed they merely followed their clientele’s wishes when they did not book British films, or as the Theater Owners of America put it, “We cannot dictate to the American public what it wants in entertainment. It sets its own standards. There will be playing time, and ample playing time, for any foreign film which meets the American public’s standards.”<sup>42</sup>

British films could survive in the mainstream market only if they competed with Hollywood’s own “B” movies. In late 1948, for example, the CBS television network purchased a block of fifty old British films for broadcast, when it was unable to acquire American-made movies. This was the widest exposure these films had ever had in the U.S.<sup>43</sup> They were presented as “programming” on one of the few occasions when British producers objected to American screenings, since they felt these prewar quota quickies would give British films a bad name. Another, quite odd, example of Britain’s entry into the second-run and “B”-movie end of the film industry was the appearance of some prestige films at drive-in theaters. In 1949, for example, *Hamlet* and *The Red Shoes* both played at drive-ins, at that time the last-run venue for a film.<sup>44</sup> This was a very different prospect from the “canned-theater” approach originally used to promote these pictures.

Also in 1949, the British government abandoned the prospect of films becoming big-dollar earners and *Kine* regularly began to feature articles about the importance of *not* succumbing to the lure of the American market.<sup>45</sup> W. J. Gell wrote that the British industry’s problems were that negative costs were too high, while most of its output remained unsuitable for the American market. He concluded: “I do not feel that the wide circulation of British films in the U.S. can be forecast, nor even a market sufficiently wide to justify costs so high, which render profitable production here very doubtful without an open American market.”<sup>46</sup>

Britain again failed to extract dollars from the U.S. market and was constantly outmaneuvered by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and studio tactics. For example, in 1947, when the British government froze American film

remittances, and other foreign governments followed its lead, American studios simply used those assets in other ways, such as to offset British remittances in the United States. Frozen assets were also invested overseas, often in international co-productions, which were very hard to regulate. This made it virtually impossible for any foreign filmmaker to extract dollars from the American market.<sup>47</sup>

**“Stix Still Nix for British Pix.”**<sup>48</sup> It is rare to hear directly from the American audience. Perhaps the only consistent and readily traceable audience voice can be found in readers’ letters to the *New York Times*, especially in its Sunday theater arts section. Clearly, this rarefied group of filmgoers was not typical of the general audience. The *Times* letters were a blunt critique of the “popular” American audience, since the individuals who wrote were generally the kind of elite cinemagoers British film distributors targeted. In contrast, practically the only time we hear from the mass audience and its feelings about British films is when they chose to boycott them. In the late 1940s, for example, an organization called the Sons of Liberty briefly led a film boycott protesting British policy in Palestine.<sup>49</sup>

The consensus in the *Times* was that British films “treat[ed] their audiences like adults,” while American films catered to the lowest common denominator. For example, on September 7, 1947, three separate readers castigated Hollywood and praised “foreign films.” As one noted, “The last picture I saw was *Great Expectations* when it was playing at the Music Hall ... not that we are highbrow, but merely because the pictures now being shown are not worth the time they require to see or the amount of money charged for them.”<sup>50</sup> In subsequent weeks, readers wrote demanding more “adult French and English pictures.” Many viewers believed foreign filmmakers were willing to address themes rejected by Hollywood, which was in part why many foreign films troubled American censors. Several readers presciently suggested a ratings system separating adults and children to accommodate “adult” films.

Western Europe’s standards of propriety were different from Hollywood’s puritanical “Do’s and Don’ts.” Not surprisingly, pressure groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency often found foreign films offensive, although after 1945 they were more willing to countenance mature-themed films than before the war. Some European filmmakers believed that sex was the best way to sell their wares in the U.S. For example, *Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) were the only foreign-language films to reach a substantial mainstream audience in the postwar decade. Their American distributors were convinced that “their remarkable success [was] due not to their merit but to the frankly pornographic advertising used to exploit them.”<sup>51</sup> There were similar comments about several Rank films thought too sexually explicit for American audiences. *Variety*’s review of *The Wicked Lady* (1945) concluded: “One can’t overlook those buxom beauties who figure in this film. That is unless the U.S. censors use the shears.”<sup>52</sup> As *Time* noted during his 1947 visit, Rank was “in effect, Britain’s movie censor, and as such often gets into brangles with Hollywood’s Johnston Office. On one of these occasions, when there was too much ‘cleavage’ for the Johnston Office in a Rank film, he spluttered in bewilderment: ‘But in England, bosoms aren’t sexy.’”<sup>53</sup>

Other British films were problematic for quite different reasons. *Oliver Twist* (1948), for example, was briefly banned and widely boycotted because Alec Guinness's portrayal of Fagan was regarded as anti-Semitic.<sup>54</sup> The Production Code Administration initially denied a seal of approval for violating the code by "characterizing a race unfairly," until the film was revised. The New York State Board of Rabbis also successfully pressured New York censors to ban the movie.<sup>55</sup>

**Distinction.** Bosley Crowther, principal film critic of the *Times*, was the quintessential Anglophile, as seen in a strikingly elitist column that praised *Murder Will Out* (1953) and other British imports for their "literary" qualities:

Response in the American market is determined almost as much by the techniques of mass audience merchandising and the consequent conditioning of tastes as it is by the quality of the product. Sometimes a great deal more. So don't cock a snoot at these pictures just because some of them haven't "sold."... The point is that this is a picture, like so many of these minor British films, which possesses commendable stimulations for customers of literate mind and taste. British pictures, especially these somewhat slighter ones, run so strongly to clever characterizations and refinements in story and atmosphere that the more cultivation brought to them, the more they may be enjoyed.<sup>56</sup>

Crowther and Richard Griffith, the Museum of Modern Art's assistant film curator, liked practically *every* British film they reviewed, in stark contrast to the trade reviews of the same films. *Variety* described *Great Expectations* in these terms: "Only rabid Dickensians will find fault with the present adaptation, and paradoxically only lovers of Dickens will derive maximum pleasure from the film. For those who don't know Dickens, much bally will be needed. Dubious if it will amount to much in the U.S."<sup>57</sup> Crowther's review was markedly different: "A perfect motion picture.... [Dickens's] works have more life in them than almost anything now written for the screen.... The quality of the author is revealed in every shot, in every line."<sup>58</sup> It is striking how both reviews devote their attention to the novel, not the film.

*Variety* was more complimentary about *Hamlet* in a review adjacent to one on Red Skelton's *The Fuller Brush Man*, just as *Oliver Twist* was reviewed next to *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. The *Hamlet* review was shrouded in a veil of high culture: "Its showing must be done with the dignity it deserves. Exhibs should profit from the handling of *Henry V* and should be warned that *Hamlet* is rich in qualities that don't readily blend with the usual ballyhoo ... won't prevent audiences from getting maximum enjoyment and an appreciation for a story that hitherto may have been obscure to millions."<sup>59</sup> Crowther, in contrast, once again praised the film's literary qualities: "[*Hamlet*] gives absolute proof that these classics are magnificently suited to the screen."<sup>60</sup>

**Inter/National Cinemas.** Given the current ubiquity of the idea of borderlessness and transnationality in cultural studies, it is interesting that the British label still carries marketing kudos in the U.S. In part, this has to do with new technologies that favor independent and some overseas producers. Video rentals and cable

have decimated the American art cinema business by reaching niche audiences in their own homes. The Arts and Entertainment Channel and Facets Video, for example, both offer extensive lists of British motion pictures and television programming for sale.

The irony in writing this is that British films have apparently acquired a niche in the American market. The aristocratic model survives in works like *Her Majesty, Mrs. Brown* (1997) and *The Madness of King George* (1994), which still play pretty much exclusively in the art theater ghetto. Nick Park's *Wallace and Grommit* series and Mike Leigh's work are very different kinds of handcrafted film, which are also exhibited solely via the art theaters, PBS screenings, and video rentals.

Films that have crossed over into multiplex screenings have typically rejected the handmade, elitist approach, such as *Trainspotting* (1996), *Bean* (1997), and, to a degree, *The Full Monty* (1997). *Trainspotting's* impenetrable regional accents essentially render it a foreign-language film, a conceit coyly mocked in its sporadic use of subtitles. *Trainspotting's* alienating rejection of conventional morality and its exuberant celebration of drug culture have led to frequent comparisons with *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). As *Variety* noted, *Trainspotting* promised "to delight a narrow band of young studs turned on by the book and its nonjudgmental tone but alienate more general viewers with its complex mix of in-your-face realism, cinematic fantasy and four letter dialogue, which sets new standards in screen profanity."<sup>61</sup> A *New Yorker* review also fixed on its outrageousness: "Old-school movie buffs will stagger home and live off Jean Renoir for the next month.... Heaven knows how the film will play here, where audiences get their fix of the British Isles through regular injections of Merchant-Ivory."<sup>62</sup>

*Trainspotting* and *Bean* have both reached the young audience typically ignored by the British film industry. *Bean* resurrected broad comedy, a rarely exported staple of British cinema. It is a bona fide transnational commercial success of the same order of magnitude as, say, *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). Like *Dundee*, *Bean* is largely set in the United States. After all the complaints that only Europeans could make films for adults, *Bean's* eponymous character is mentally a child and exploits a form of visual comedy that appeals to a youthful lowest common denominator.

*Brassed Off* (1996) and *The Full Monty* are both comedies informed by social realism and populated by protagonists motivated by the specter of unemployment. Like *Trainspotting*, both left some American viewers asking for subtitles. Both reject the Hugh Grant incarnation of Britain in favor of a northern, working-class version. *The Full Monty* is a high-concept, low-budget independent film: unemployed steelworkers willing to strip for self-respect. Although it has overtaken *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) in the popularity stakes inside the U.K., it is unlikely to challenge that film's international receipts of well over £100 million.

These blue-collar regional films can be seen as an updating of the Ealing comedy tradition. In the 1940s and 1950s, Ealing's quaint British community-centered comedies played in American art theaters, which remain the principal venue for Britain's contemporary, more sharply edged descendants.

**New Distribution Possibilities.** More important than this new take on British regionalism is the emergence in the U.S. of boutique distributors like Sony Pictures Classics, Miramax, and New Line and of a related development, the growth of myriad film festivals that create distribution opportunities denied to earlier British filmmakers. The Sundance phenomenon has nurtured a significant international presence within the United States, as have sundry cable channels playing independent and alternative work. Both festivals and cable channels favor home-grown independent films, but there is room for British independents too. The multiplex remains largely closed to British product, as it is to most American independents.

An issue implicit in much of the present discussion is the irrelevance of national labels for cultural software. *Trainspotting* is genuinely transnational, because it reaches out to a very particular age demographic. Generation, not nation, is at the core of its appeal. Ascribing national origin to either product or consumer, and perhaps the very label “British film,” ought perhaps to be abandoned as national and other boundaries collapse and disappear. Corporate media culture has internalized these changes, and the distinction elicited by the term “British film” has been commodified and survives as a label on video store shelves or in film reviews. The label no longer “belongs” in any simple way to Britain, however, just as the global entertainment and media industries, although bearing a strong American imprint, are no longer so straightforwardly American.

## Notes

1. In many ways, the standard works on American media overseas remain Thomas H. Guback, *The International Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), and Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1986). An extremely thorough examination of the diplomacy of the American film industry is Ian C. Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign: The North Atlantic Movie Trade, 1920–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). See also Steven S. Wildman and Stephen E. Siwek, *International Trade in Films and Television Programs* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1988). See also Colin Hoskins and S. McFayden, “International Marketing Strategies for a Cultural Service,” *International Marketing Review* 8, no. 2 (1991). Relatively little has been written on foreign media inside the U.S. Jarvie's work begins to address this, although it is concerned primarily with exports. See also “Oscar Looks Abroad, but Foreign Films Have Had a Tough Time Reaching American Screen,” *Newsweek*, March 12, 1990.
2. In 1947, while preparing to negotiate the terms of the GATT, the State Department's principal authority on international trade in motion pictures noted in an internal memorandum: “We cannot maintain, either in logic or in equity, that screen quotas on motion picture films are in the same category with ‘internal regulations’ which should not be used ‘to afford protection ... for any national product,’ as set forth in the London draft of Article 15.” Letter, Bliss to Brown, “Screen Quotas and Import Duties,” June 17, 1947, State Department files, RG 43, S7-D-284, Box 60.
3. Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*, 18. Elsewhere Jarvie notes: “Motion pictures were a new commodity, of a kind not seen before. Their physical bulk as exports involved at most a few hundred items per year (cases containing film cans). Yet they were reusable and reproducible and could generate revenue greatly in excess of that

- produced by some raw material or manufactured good of comparable bulk. Unlike a piece of machinery or a ton of ore, though, motion pictures as cultural artifacts were taken to be the product of *mentalities*, capable in turn of influencing mentalities,” 2.
4. Herbert I. Schiller, “The Privatization and Transnationalization of Culture,” in Ian H. Angus and Sut Jhally, eds., *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
  5. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, 1937), 315.
  6. Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London: Elek, 1974), 85
  7. Lester C. Thurow, *Building Wealth: The New Rules for Individuals, Companies, and Nations* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).
  8. Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh, “Homogenisation of Global Culture,” at “<http://www.converge.org.nz/pirm/homogeni.htm>” <http://www.converge.org.nz/pirm/homogeni.htm>.
  9. For a fuller discussion of national identity and media culture, see the special issue, “Mediating the National,” in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14, no. 3 (spring 1993), esp. James Schwoch, “Cold War, Hegemony, Postmodernism: American Television and the World-System, 1942–1992,” 9–24, and Stephen Crofts, “Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s,” 49–68. See also Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, eds., *Popular European Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
  10. See Sarah Street and Margaret Dickinson, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government* (London: British Film Institute, 1985). This is an excellent close reading of attempts to legislate British film into existence via quotas, tariffs, and loans to domestic filmmakers.
  11. See Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (New York: Routledge, 1987).
  12. *Daily Yomiuri* television listings, July 25, 1993.
  13. Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, N.J., Scarecrow Press, 1983), 13.
  14. For example, J. Flint, “The Myth of U.S. Manufacturing Decline,” *Forbes*, January 19, 1993. Flint notes, “Adam Smith’s invisible hand is better at creating real jobs than Harvard professors are.”
  15. Don Dougan Humphrey, *American Imports* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1955), 234.
  16. Jake Eberts and Terry Ilott, *My Indecision Is Final: The Rise and Fall of Goldcrest Films* (London: Faber, 1990), 1–2.
  17. Hoskins and McFayden, “International Marketing Strategies.” Hoskins and McFayden note that U.K. television programming packaged as masterpiece theater on PBS has been known to get a 5–10 share.
  18. *New York Times*, December 29, 1946.
  19. *Variety*, April 24, 1946.
  20. Guback, *The International Film Industry*, 69.
  21. Douglas Gomery and Robert C. Allen, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1985).
  22. Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment*, 131.
  23. Douglas Gomery, “Ethnic Theaters and Art Cinemas,” in Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), chap. 9, esp. 181–84. See also C. Ogan, “The Audience for Foreign Film in the United States,” *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 4 (autumn 1990).
  24. *Kine Weekly*, February 26, 1948.

25. Spyros Skouras gave a press conference when visiting Britain in 1948. When he was asked for a figure on dollar returns on British films, he hedged, "I would be a financial wizard to be able to answer that," January 22, 1948, Skouras papers, file M509, Special Collections, Stanford University Library.
26. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 31.
27. *Variety*, April 24, 1946.
28. *New York Times*, July 13, 1989.
29. Spyros Skouras, speech to national sales convention (undated), Skouras papers, Special Collections, Stanford University Library.
30. Street and Dickinson, *Cinema and State*, 175.
31. *Kine Weekly*, January 23, 1947.
32. *Kine Weekly*, July 10, 1947.
33. Geoffrey MacNab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (New York: Routledge: 1993); for a contemporary account of Rank's activities, see "King Arthur & Co.," *Time*, May 19, 1947.
34. Richard Griffith, "Where Are the Dollars?" *Sight and Sound* (January 1950): 39.
35. On the embargo, see Jarvie, *Hollywood's Overseas Campaign*; see also Paul Swann, "The Hollywood Embargo on Exporting Films to Britain, 1947–1948," in Bruce Austin, ed., *Current Research in Film*, vol. 3 (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1987).
36. *New York Times*, June 11, 1950.
37. Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 58.
38. *Kine Weekly*, August 26, 1948.
39. At the time of writing, *Il Postino* (1995) promised to be the most successful foreign-language crossover film, beating the box-office records of earlier European films such as *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) and *Cinema Paradiso* (1989), which had broken out of the art cinema circuit. It is not clear yet whether this was a result of the marketing tactics of independent distributors like Miramax or an indication of some basic changes in the American film audience.
40. *Kine Weekly*, July 31, 1947. For more on Wilcox, see Sue Harper, "Studying Popular Taste: British Historical Films in the 1930s," in Dyer and Vincendeau, *Popular European Cinema*.
41. *Kine Weekly*, August 7, 1947.
42. *Kine Weekly*, October 14, 1948.
43. *Kine Weekly*, November 18, 1948.
44. *Kine Weekly*, March 10, 1949.
45. *Kine Weekly*, September 1, 1949.
46. *Kine Weekly*, June 30, 1949.
47. During the 1950s, it became common to offset the production costs of major Hollywood epics by producing them overseas. For example, in 1959–1960, the Italian government tried to tax the worldwide receipts of Twentieth Century-Fox's *Ben Hur*, which had been made in large part on location in Italy and was underwritten with frozen remittances. The Italian Ministry of Finance pursued the film's worldwide gross. This is an example of a national government trying to frame an international cultural commodity that defied traditional national boundaries. Letter, E. J. to Spyros Skouras, July 27, 1960. Skouras papers, Special Collections, Stanford University Library.
48. *Variety* headline, cited in *Kine Weekly*, June 26, 1947.
49. *New York Times*, December 22, 1948.
50. *New York Times*, September 7, 1947.

51. Richard Griffith, "European Films and American Audiences," *Saturday Review of Literature*, January 1951.
52. *Variety*, November 28, 1945.
53. "King Arthur & Co," *Time*, May 19, 1947.
54. John Howard Lawson, *Film in the Battle of Ideas* (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1953), 95.
55. Edward De Grazia and Roger K. Newman, *Banned Films: Movies, Censors, and the First Amendment* (New York: Bowker, 1982), 72.
56. *New York Times*, April 12, 1953.
57. *Variety*, December 25, 1946.
58. *New York Times*, May 23, 1947.
59. *Variety*, May 12, 1948.
60. *New York Times*, September 30, 1948.
61. *Variety*, February 12, 1996.
62. *New Yorker*, July 22, 1996.