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978-0-521-65156-1 - Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for
Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950

John Trumbour

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Selling Hollywood to the World

U.S. AND EUROPEAN STRUGGLES FOR MASTERY OF THE
GLOBAL FILM INDUSTRY, 1920–1950

The global expansion of Hollywood and American popular culture in the first decades of the twentieth century met with strong opposition throughout the world. Determined to defeat such resistance, the Hollywood moguls created a powerful trade organization that worked closely with the State Department in an effort to expand the U.S. film industry's dominance worldwide. This book offers insight into and analysis of European efforts to overcome the U.S. film industry's preeminence. It focuses particularly on Britain, Hollywood's largest overseas market of the interwar years; France, a nation with an alternative vision of cinema; and Belgium, which was entrusted by the Vatican with coordination of the international movement against depravity in films. In contributing to the understanding of American popular culture at home and abroad, this study demonstrates Hollywood's role in orchestrating the American Century.

John Trumbour is Research Director at the Harvard University Trade Union Program. Editor of *The Dividing Rhine: Politics and Society in Contemporary France and Germany*, he has also published articles in the *New York Times*, *Monthly Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and the *South Asia Bulletin*. His dissertation, which served as the basis for this work, received the Allan Nevins Prize for Literary Distinction in the Writing of History from the Society of American Historians.

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To my parents

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John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>page</i> xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvi
Introduction	I
PART ONE. THE UNITED STATES	
1 The Domestic Roots of Hollywood's Foreign Policy: Censorship and Corporatism in the Formation of the MPPDA, 1921–1941	17
2 Hollywood and the State Department: Overseas Expansion and America's Subversion	63
3 The MPAA and the State Department: Order and Autonomy in the Postwar World	91
PART TWO. GREAT BRITAIN	
4 Grierson, the Documentary Spirit, and the Projection of Britain	119
5 The Korda Road to Riches, Recovery, and Ruin	141
6 The Age of Rank	168
7 The U.S.–U.K. Film Conflict: The Fading Dream of Mastering Hollywood	200
PART THREE. TWO CONTINENTAL CASE STUDIES: BELGIUM AND FRANCE	
8 Belgium and the Making of an International Catholic Film Movement	211
9 France and Resistance to Hollywood: Empire, Artisans, and the State	226
	ix

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65156-1 - Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for
Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950

John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Contents

10	France and the Politics of State Intervention	258
	Conclusion	275
	Notes	289
	Selected Bibliography	341
	Filmography	353
	Index	363

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65156-1 - Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for
Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950

John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

- | | |
|--|--------|
| 1. Charts prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce on the distribution of motion picture theaters throughout the world | page 5 |
| 2. A chart from the early 1930s showing the global marketing strategies of Famous Players–Lasky Corporation (aka Paramount Pictures) | 9 |
| 3. Looking confident in pinstripes and flannel, Will H. Hays, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, poses with the actress Constance Talmadge and the director Sidney Franklin | 23 |
| 4. In his battles to defeat the MPPC (aka Film Trust), Carl Laemmle published cartoons and text in the <i>Moving Picture Herald</i> during May and June 1909 expressing his world view | 24–5 |
| 5. A Dutch newspaper depicts a scissors- and umbrella-wielding opponent of the film industry who is forcing Chaplin and other familiar stars out of the country | 69 |
| 6. On 21 February 1931, Charlie Chaplin takes a stroll with Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, a frequent critic of Hollywood’s dangers to the British Empire | 143 |
| 7. On the night of the premiere of <i>The Private Life of Don Juan</i> (1934), the Bombay-born film star Merle Oberon and Alexander Korda, whom she would marry in 1939, greet admirers at the new London Pavilion | 155 |
| 8. Lord Robert Baden-Powell (1857–1941), the founder of the Boy Scouts, condemned cinema for contributing to the herd mentality that imperiled Western civilization | 163 |
| 9. With a map showing the global ambitions of his film organization, British movie mogul J. Arthur Rank confers in May 1947 with Eric Johnston, the president of the Motion Picture Association of America | 193 |
| 10. As foreign minister of Britain in the early postwar period, Ernest Bevin received praise from the U.S. government for helping to settle trade disputes on terms congenial to Hollywood interests | 197 |
| 11. A globe shrouded in celluloid with the inscription, “I am the master of the world,” symbol of the Belgium-based Office Catholique International du Cinéma (OCIC) | 217 |
| | xi |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65156-1 - Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for
Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950

John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

Illustrations

12. In a festive mood at a Christmas party of 1948 at Lime Grove Baths,
Hammersmith, British film magnate J. Arthur Rank pours tea for the
children of his staff

283

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978-0-521-65156-1 - Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for
Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950

John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

A decade ago, I attended a series of lectures on films by Gore Vidal in which the writer immediately confessed that “the only thing I ever really liked to do was go to the movies. Naturally, Sex and Art always took precedence over the cinema. Unfortunately, neither ever proved to be as dependable. . . .” For Vidal, “Movies are the lingua franca of the twentieth century. The Tenth Muse, as they call the movies in Italy, has driven the other nine right off Olympus – or off the peak, anyway.”

A few weeks after winning the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature, V. S. Naipaul seconded Vidal’s sentiments in admitting that “the movies in the twentieth century were much more important as a forum for shaping people’s feelings and educating people than literature.” Though ill at ease with the “technical exhibitionism” of contemporary movies, he glories in his “favorite film,” *High Sierra* starring Ida Lupino and Humphrey Bogart. The gangster Bogart perishes in what Warner Brothers billed as “The blazing mountain manhunt for Killer Mad-Dog Earle!”

I fear that my own excursions into cinema policy and moral crusades against Hollywood may be weighed down by representatives of a very different sensibility; that is, those who harbor feelings of betrayal by the Tenth Muse. The talk-show host Jay Leno captured their view of the U.S. culture industry when he did a promotion for the pan-European NBC Super Channel: “We’re going to ruin your culture just like we ruined our own!”

At the end of the twentieth century, clouds of gloominess thickened in Europe about the future of film policy, those measures seeking to strengthen avenues of expression outside corporate Hollywood. In 1998, thirty-nine of the top forty most successful films in global sales came from U.S. companies. Long in the vanguard of European cinema, France watched as national production dwindled from over 53 percent of domestic box-office receipts in 1982 to 27 percent in 1998. Nine out of the top ten films in France

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John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

during 1999 came from the United States. While Great Britain via the multiplex revolution experienced a remarkable threefold leap in cinema attendance during the 1990s over the nadir of the 1980s, Hollywood soon grabbed levels of market dominance that decades ago would have provoked parliamentary outcries of national crisis. After reaching 27 percent of the national market in 1997, the share of box-office receipts for British films plunged by half the following year. Germany actually dropped below 10 percent of the domestic market in 1998.

In light of the latest achievements of Denmark, a miniature nation of five million that has exceeded a 20 percent market share for national producers in 1999 and 2000, the performance of Europe's large nations seems rather embarrassing. Some commentators are calling for European countries to find out what's behind the Danish film renaissance, so that they can emulate its model of film schools and national subsidies. (There may be some hope for other small nations such as Belgium, after all.) Other observers call on Europeans to broaden their horizons. Asian cinema, particularly in India, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, China, and Iran, has shown a creativity in recent years that belies the narratives of international despair. After the softening of quotas in the late 1990s, Korea went from a 20 percent to a 40 percent national market share at the turn of the century, and it is becoming a favored lesson for free-market opponents of European state intervention.

State intervention is, however, far from dying. Recently said to be afflicted with stuporous decline, the Gallic Rooster is once again crowing, as French films have secured close to 50 percent of the nation's box-office receipts in the first half of 2001. Some of the French cinematic surge of the early twenty-first century is due to the arrival of the big-budget films of Gaulywood, a development that some fear could extinguish the nation's heritage of small-scale, artisanal movie production. For certain critics, the enemy of France is the large multinational media conglomerate, and they spurn fixation on Hollywood or the United States alone as the danger to French culture. Instead of a simple assault against the American colossus, the fin-de-siècle European uprisings against globalization have much more to do with opposing the depredations of transnational capital. (For that matter, the French New Wave of the earlier postwar era revered the best Hollywood directors, and their rebellion could not properly be construed as some narrow nativist backlash.)

My own historical work takes up some of the more feverish debates of an earlier epoch, 1920–50. If History (Clio) is one of the Nine Muses who have been knocked off Olympus by the Tenth Muse (Cinema), I am grate-

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xv

ful to the few of you who continue to search the great peak's base for signs of life among those left waylaid. I hope that my work might in some small way help to deepen understanding of the struggles over popular culture of the previous century.

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John Trumbour

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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In recent years, I have enjoyed teaching film studies to labor leaders at the Harvard Trade Union Program. My coworkers Elaine Bernard, Lorette Baptiste, Laurie Fafard, and Margy Ryzdzyński have made the HTUP a welcome place for a whole range of interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship on the worlds of work and culture. At the Department of History at Harvard, I benefited from the workshops of Akira Iriye, as well as the regular concern of Laura Johnson, David Nickles, Susan Hunt, John Womack, and Dennis Skiotis. Professor emeritus Daniel Aaron of the Department of English and American Literature and Language has reached out to me, as well as to so many other young scholars whose work may not have won over the guardians of academic orthodoxy at the Crimson university. There are many other friends and individuals thanked for specific contributions in the book's notes.

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