

THE FRENCH DECLINE OF THE FILM INDUSTRY

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This essay will discuss the main factors that led to France's declining film industry amongst which, World War I, World War II, and simultaneously, the United States' rising influence and control of the film industry, played the most important roles.

The discussion will look at France's declining influence in film by providing a general overview of the state of film in France from 1895-1945. However the discussion's focus will be concerned with World War I & II, as they are the most important events amongst others which caused France's decline in film. As the events in France are discussed there will be simultaneous reference to the United States and it's role in replacing France as the biggest film exporter in the world.

The French film industry has had to dodge the effects of two World Wars while it tried to simultaneously keep it's position in the world market. However the French film industry has experienced periods of success before and after the world wars making it's decline a process lasting a number of years as opposed to happening over night or being linked to one single event.

The French film industry, for purposes of clarity, will be divided into six parts; 1895-1914, 1914-1918, 1918-1929, 1929-1939, 1939-1945, and 1945 to the present. Each period characterizes a fundamental shift in the French industry's position in the global market of film.

France, in the years leading up to the First World War produced 60-70% of all imported films globally, which came from it's Paris studios Pathe, Gaumont, and

Eclair. In fact Pathe was one of the earliest studios to use vertical integration, that is producing, distributing, and exhibiting a film, as well as horizontal integration, meaning expanding into new countries. The combination of vertical and horizontal integration led to its worldwide domination of the film industry up to World War I. However because France's economy was based primarily on small business it had no major corporate financial base as the U.S. had with its large corporations which developed in the inter war years.

The war years caused a severe economic blow for French film industry. World War I blockaded France's film exportation and forced it to cut back on large productions to focus on low budget filmmaking. In essence the French film industry kept from collapsing because it produced low budget films that were capable of yielding profits from the French home market alone. France succeeded in sustaining its film industry from its home market alone by offering "two for one" film specials which in the long run meant that returns on films were smaller and therefore only low budget films could be produced. The making of low budget films would play a significant role in developing the primary film style of the World War II, Realism. Realism was appealing for low budget film making because it focused on filming events that were real to life or were shot in real time. Real time filming meant that events were filmed as they happened in real life by using the actual people on location rather than actors thus making the costs significantly lower. Although World War I caused many talented people to flee or be recruited in military service and production was stalled, the single most important factor was France's loss of its foreign market.

Simultaneously, the U.S. film industry, unchanged by the war, was expanding at the same rate that the French film industry lost its market during the war. The strength of the U.S. film industry was found not in its production, from 1910-1918, but rather in its development of globally recognized stars such as, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Mack Sennett & D.W. Griffith. The developments in the U.S. during World War I played a role, not in surpassing, but rather in catching up to the French film industry, by capturing some share of the global market of exports.

The post WWI era from 1918-1929 created, for France, distinct film styles most notably; Impressionist School 1920-1927, Avant Garde 1923-1933, and, later, the Renaissance Of French Cinema 1934-1940. The twenties were seen as a radical shift in France's position in the film market as only 20-30% of films seen in France were French, the rest were mostly American. The Twenties in fact saw France producing only 60-70 films a year. The reason for this drop in film production was that Pathe and Gaumont, the largest film producers in France cut back on producing and concentrated on distributing and exhibiting. As a result Pathe and Gaumont did not

worry about where the films that they were distributing and exhibiting were made. The cut back in French film production in the twenties occurred because film makers did not want to take the risk that film making implied, and thought that they could benefit more by just distributing and exhibiting films. However, as French film makers quickly found out, they would be at the mercy of American production companies to produce films to keep their distribution and exhibition enterprises operating.

The French era from 1929-1939 was characterized by the effects of the great depression as simultaneously film was absorbing the extra costs that the coming of sound implied. Sound had two consequences for the French film industry, first the sound technologies resulted in extra cost for France and secondly the language barrier meant that French film could no longer be understood worldwide. Sound affected the French film industry because its sound devices were purchased from the U.S. or Germany causing and equipment costs to double. The second impact that sound had on French film, was that language became a barrier to countries that were importing French films. Sound inside France developed nationalism amongst some French filmmakers and their audiences, which raised awareness as to where the films were being imported. The language issue in French film helped keep the film industry alive as interest groups, in the form of boycotting none French films, were formed to protect the declining industry.

The great depression, which occurred in succession was significant for two reasons, French film was affected economically because money was poured out of the film industry and into other industries. France did not have a corporate base to finance film as the U.S. had developed. This being said however, the film industry was the least affected in the field of entertainment as cabarets, and music halls fell by 40-50% of their original levels before the depression. The second impact was that France's franc became over valued as other countries like Britain devalued their currency thus making French films too expensive to import, further reducing the sale of films abroad thus diminishing the already small foreign market. The U.S., the biggest potential film market, was not importing French films because its industry had developed a talent pool that France could no longer compete with.

Therefore, the great depression and the coming of sound played their part in disconnecting France from it's global market and making film twice as expensive to produce, which hurt the French film industry in favour of the U.S.. The developments in the U.S. between WWI & WWII, saw the emergence of systems of vertical integration where a handful of companies such as MGM, Warner, United Artist etc, produced, distributed, and screened films in their own theatres. This guaranteed an audience and revenue a system which France had not yet developed

to the degree of their counter parts in the U.S.. The consequence for France was that, although its economy was back in order, it could not compete with the U.S. film market, which could afford to invest more money into film. This coupled with the accumulated lack of investment during WWII prevented the French film industry from sustaining any growth capable of competing with the U.S. Stars that helped sell corporate products giving the U.S. film industry the support of corporate dollars fueled consumerism in the United States.

Therefore developments, which led to cooperation between the major film studios and corporations, created a financial base unmatched by any other country resulting in the global domination of the film market by the United States. France from 1940-1944 was resisting foreign influence and developed nationalistic tendencies claiming that it was a cinema of resistance and did not ally itself with occupying powers, with the exception of Germany, to aid in keeping the production of it's film industry operating. France also resisted the flood of Jews that poured in from Germany because they began to control the French film industry.

Consequently, France led an attack on the Jewish control of the film industry claiming that they were reestablishing the "Frenchness" of French cinema. France's creative process, despite resistance, war, and economic burdens, was in the forefront of film making when the war broke out. That is to say, as mentioned above its global influence, in terms of market share was on the decline, but it's creative process, to be discussed momentarily, was on the rise. That is, France saw it's inability to compete with U.S. production so France turned to producing quality, as opposed to quantity films. However because of the war a talented pool of directors and actors fled the country or went into hiding, which caused the industry to lose its creative process.

French cinema, in an attempt during World War II, to keep it's cinema under French influence and control succeeded in creating a new film style that made films with a lack of resources and personnel as opposed to the abundance of it. This type of film making called Realism, found in many European countries, found a place in cinema as a distinctive film genre during World War II. Its origins in France began when filmmakers had to produce low budget films that were profitable from the French home market alone.

The French version of Realism was Poetic Realism, which is film in an intellectualized sense. It stressed fatalistic pessimism, romantic style, blended into a theatrical style of filmmaking. France attacked Hollywood's make belief by saying that it set aside the real issues. France therefore adopted a cinema of Poetic Realism,

in part, modelled from Rossellini's concept of Neo-Realism in Italy, which aimed at appealing to educate as opposed to appealing to popular tastes. In the end, France chose to compete with Hollywood by producing quality films rather than quantity.

The consequences of World War Two, on a broader scale, on the French film industry was measured in the degree of control that the United States took advantage of in the post-war era. World War I allowed the United States to catch up to the French film industry during which France was ahead in film making, the inter war years destroyed France's foreign film markets, where as World War II, specifically saw the United States' domination French film market from 1944 onward. Hollywood surpassed French film making because the economy of France was devastated and had no money to pour into the film industry, in both WWI & WWII, where as the United States was economically sound after both wars and could invest millions of dollars into it's film industry. The U.S. film industry began its post-war period with record-breaking profits in 1946. However when Americans began to divert their spending, from film to other commodities such as homes during their post-war boom it caused a serious drain on Hollywood's profits. Hollywood was also under attack with McCarthy's hearings and certain films were scrutinized as being tainted with communist messages coming from "The Hollywood Ten". A further blow to the American industry was a landmark ruling in 1948 forcing "the big five"(major studios) to sell their theatre holdings which hurt their profit making abilities. These events increased the U.S. determination to control foreign markets, in search of profits.

Therefore chaos at homes in changing industries, television, and ways of operating domestically increased the pressure on Hollywood executives to look for profits abroad. Consequently half of Hollywood's income after WWII came from abroad. However Hollywood's come back, despite it's economic base, which was falling apart as discussed above, U.S. foreign aid paved the way for the Americans to re-enter the European markets. Americans wanted to strengthen and rebuild foreign film industries parallel to the Marshall Plan so as to guarantee the European film industries were strong enough to import American films. This plan succeeded because American films in Europe owned half of all screening time in 1953.

However some French film industry leaders had a different point of view in that they wanted to lure Frenchmen away from Hollywood style films. However, until their economic resources were back in order, they were defenceless against the Hollywood giants. Resistance came strenuously from Britain, Italy and France who amongst others, responded by imposing taxes on imported films and by blocking profits by forcing film companies to reinvest in the French economy. Statistics show that during the war French films constituted 85% of screening verses 40% between

1946-54 which led to the passage of laws forcing French films to dominate screens five out of thirteen weeks.

When the American film industry saw the alienation that had formed among European film companies, Hollywood formed (MPEAA) The Motion Picture Export Association Of America which organised a united front abroad, capable of assaulting any single foreign film industry. However France, as did other industries, imposed protective measures to insure some kind of control over their industries. France required that 20 weeks out of the year be reserved to French film, Britain required 45% of screening time be reserved to British film, and Italy required 80 days a year for Italian films. Therefore, to limit American encroachment all European countries began to cooperate as they financed productions or offered cash prizes to the best European films. Similar to the U.S MPEAA, Europeans began making co-productions, which would allow them to get subsidies from two governments for one production. Also various film festivals were set up to further encourage film making in Europe, among them, the Venice and Cannes film festivals erected in 1946 & 1947 respectively. The International Art Cinema gave predominance over experimentation and innovation rather than Hollywood's traditional styles, which became known as the high arts or the intellectual movement in the arts. Therefore after the liberation a quota was strictly maintained because of the flood of back logged Hollywood films. However, French directors became increasingly attracted to colour spectacles and traditional film making which weakened the potential that Poetic realism could have had for France. It was not until the fifties that the Cahiers Du Cinema, sphere headed by Jean Luc Goddard, was set up which criticized the older films maker's technic and their lack of support for the realist style of film making. Thanks to the Cahiers Du Cinema, France was seen and to a certain extent is still seen as the aesthetic conscience of world cinema. This was a movement that Italy lacked and consequently it's Neo-Realist movement faded. However France succeeded in preserving it's Poetic Realism and French film is respected through out the world and since the war, film became the most important art form in France.

In sum the post war resistance that developed in France, was in fact a general European trend. Film making focused on being more true to life, revealing the unpleasant realities of class antagonisms, and emphasized on current social problems, as a protest against U.S. control.

In conclusion what permitted the French film market to survive was the lack of resources and not the abundance of it. They were forced to make films out of nothing, as Italy did in using none actors in some of it's productions. French film making focused on reality rather than fantasy allowing them to create something that was different which provided a means to compete, without having to directly

challenge American film making. Also French film companies focused on making fewer films and concentrated on quality rather than mass producing films in the "factory like" Hollywood practices.

However the truth is that the language barrier will insure Hollywood's domination for years to come. This coupled with Hollywood's visual predominance and easily translated action films means that Hollywood's visuals will thrive in the French film markets where as France's filmic social messages taking predominance over visual effects will not succeed with the masses in the U.S.

by Pierre Hobson