

Protection Isn't a Workable Remedy for Europe's Audiovisual Deficit

MUNICH — The French want the European Commission to save European culture from those rapacious Americans. Ironically, the rescue plan that the Commission debates this Wednesday is entitled "Television Without Frontiers." But this is strictly Newspeak. A key proposal in the directive is to install an electronic curtain across the Atlantic in order to keep out American television.

If the French get their way, 50 percent of European television fare will have to be "made in Europe" for at least 10 years.

An EU directive has been on the books since 1989 with a two-word-proviso, "where practicable," that effectively emasculated it. Now the quota is to be cast in concrete in order to save Europe from "cultural suicide," as Jacques Toubon, the French minister

By Josef Joffe

of culture, likes to put it. This is silly in more ways than one, and, given the lineup in the European Union, the French will most likely not prevail. But Mr. Toubon has already vowed to carry the fight into the European Parliament.

Thus, it is critical to separate fact from folly and fancy. The French have at least one potent argument in their favor. There is a large audiovisual deficit in the trade balance between the United States and the European Union — about \$3.5 billion.

But by huge margins Europeans on a couch potatoes prefer Hollywood to the homemade stuff of their neighbors. Only one in five films produced locally makes it across the border into another European country.

Is European culture at stake, as Mr. Toubon would have us believe? It is more a matter of cash, and, generally, of protectionism pure and simple.

Battening down the hatches will neither save European culture nor rejuvenate Europe's film and television industries.

By "culture," the French minister in charge of it presumably means Plato and Prokofiev, Shakespeare and Dante, Kafka and Kant, names justly held in awe because they define Western civilization. These icons have never been threatened by "Kojak" and "Speed." MTV will not murder Mozart, nor will Mickey Mouse muscle aside Molière. They are eternal.

Nothing the Commission can do will decide the age-old battle

between low-brow and high-brow in favor of "real" culture. Closing down "Cats" will not send them off to "Don Giovanni." Looking up the video archives will not drive the kids to the Comédie Française.

No, quotas will only change the nationality of television pulp. Instead of "Hunter" and "Magnum," there will be more knock-offs of the French, German and Italian variety — plus more "Glücksrad," the German version of "Wheel of Fortune."

So let's not talk about culture when we mean cash — less of it for the United States and more for European producers.

But even that will not happen in the longer run if the only prescription for the ailments of Europe's film and television industry is just more protection.

Take France, which boasts the most heavily subsidized film industry in Europe, with \$500 million per year. Look at the numbers of the past decade. As admissions to French movies went down from 90 to 45 million per year, attendance for U.S. movies stayed about the same: 80 million. Ergo, subsidies don't shape tastes or sell tickets, not even in France.

Then look at Britain, one of the least subsidized countries (\$18 million in subsidies). "Four Weddings and a Funeral" has been a hit throughout the world, and Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare sagas have penetrated even America, the toughest market of all.

Finally, take Germany, the No. 2 in the subsidy sweepstakes, with \$185 million per annum. Where are the grandchildren of Lang, Pabst and Lubitsch? In the United States, where Wolfgang Peterson ("Das Boot") has cracked Hollywood, and where Roland

Emmerich has just scored big with "Stargate."

To put it mildly, government handouts do not correlate well with either commercial success or the allocation of talent. Indeed, protection does to films exactly what it does to any other sheltered sector. It rewards inefficient, protects encrusted structures, and drives out talent. The Economist notes that 85 percent of Europe's movie directors are over 50 years old. One wonders why.

If protection worked, French corn and German coal would rule the world. And if foreign competition had not finally awakened the U.S. car industry, American buyers would still drive clunkers.

If the EU commissioners truly want to help their television and film industries, they will tell the French that one protectionist monster, the Common Agricultural Policy, is more than enough.

If Paris prevails in the quota quarrel, the following bet is a sure winner. Prime time on European television will still belong to Hollywood, and the wee hours will belong to a lonely, doubtless very "cultural" Euro-movie. As it circulates through the sprockets, it will discharge only one function: to meet the quota.

The writer is editorial page editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He contributed this comment to the *International Herald Tribune*.

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