Global Cinderella: *Sabrina* (1954), Hollywood, and Postwar Internationalism

by Dina M. Smith

Discourses on U.S. postwar foreign policy have found their way into Hollywood fare, particularly Billy Wilder’s Cinderella films, such as *Sabrina* (1954). These films cast the period’s gendered, dominant foreign policy discourses in the terms of the Hollywood Cinderella romance: orphan Europe can be seduced by American assistance.

In the years immediately following World War II, under such measures as the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan, the United States doled out some $23 billion to Western European nations with the return promise of increased capital investments as well as unlimited free trade. This assistance, combined with military and cultural expansion, promised America an “empire by invitation,” to use historian Geir Lundestad’s phrase. This so-called historical seduction invites a critique of the ways in which U.S. foreign policy has continually used gendered metaphors to describe its foreign relations. In other words, gender structures, such as the metaphor “empire by invitation,” inform not only international relations but the era’s various social relations as well.

This article poses a series of “love matchings” between various levels of discourse, focusing on the way these structures enter the social imaginary, particularly in Billy Wilder’s popular 1950s Cinderella films, which continually cast women/country as part of a profitable exchange. These films, specifically *Sabrina* (1954), provide a way into the intersecting cultural/economic discourses of the period. *Sabrina* most richly dramatizes the dominant foreign policy narrative of the time: a culturally savvy orphan girl (Europe) is in need of a strong rich male (American assistance). Wilder seems self-consciously to foreground economic and cultural exchanges between postwar Europe and the United States. Indeed, that an Austrian immigrant had clout in Hollywood (he is alleged to have told Louis B. Mayer to “fuck off” after a screening of *Sunset Boulevard* and got away with it, career unscathed) bespeaks the era’s and Hollywood’s new internationalism.

Cast as the orphan girl in desperate need of American assistance, Europe, more specifically Paris, no longer operated only as the “other woman,” as Geoffrey S. Smith describes America’s long-standing prewar vision of Europe as temptress. More to the point, postwar Paris became the international gamín. Sophisticated yet displaced, Paris as Cinderella desired a commodity make-over (a new gown

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and glass slippers). She eagerly awaited her wedding to the prince, American capitalism. The United States then privileged its Western European economic and military support for a reason: America continued to rely on and to usurp Western European culture while it secured European markets and forestalled the growth of communism in this pivotal geopolitical arena. Indeed, after the war, the USSR was not very important to the United States except that its “very existence complicated the overarching American task of reconstructing Western Europe and integrating it into a global free market.”

The battle against communism began over reconstruction and the rebuilding of Europe’s decimated national economies. In a poll taken after the war, the French chose the U.S. (47 percent) over the Soviet Union (23 percent) as the preferred leader of wartime reconversion and reconstruction; U.S. control over reconstruction assured its economic and military hegemony. As Lundestad notes, “U.S. economic assistance was normally given with several strings attached. The French had to agree to promote trade with the rest of the world and to discourage the setting up of regional trading blocs.” This aid “represented an instrument with great potential for intervention, since the various countries could draw upon these funds with the consent of the United States.”

After the war, not only did the U.S. influence Western Europe militarily, politically, economically, and culturally but it also secured once inaccessible, provincial European markets for Americans. Goods such as German machinery and French fashions flooded the American market during the 1950s. In this context, Western Europe operated as a sort of postwar trophy wife for aspiring American capital and culture. According to this logic, Paris—and, by extension, Western Europe—needed America’s protection both economically and culturally.

This “Americanization” of Western Europe had its price, however, most notably renewed anxiety among American critics over the inferior quality of mass-produced U.S. culture. New York critics, such as Clement Greenberg and William Philips, bemoaned this lack of “quality” culture, given the powerful leadership role of the U.S. in the world’s political economy. In “The Portrait of an Artist as an American,” Philips bespeaks this anxiety:

In the past, our own creative energy has been nourished by new literary movements in Europe. Today, however, an impoverished and politically tottering Europe is not only dependent on the economic resources of the United States but is also, apparently, more receptive than ever before to its cultural advances. The historical irony in this dual role of the United States is merely an extension of the contradiction at the heart of our civilization. For, on the one hand, our economic power and democratic myths behind our institutions are all that stand in the path of Stalinist enslavement in Europe. On the other hand, the United States might well become the greatest exporter of kitsch the world has ever seen.

In the years following this pronouncement, Greenberg, Philips, and others created a “new” American avant-garde, seemingly independent of its more “feminine,” orphaned Parisian counterpart. Indeed, according to Serge Guilbaut, American critics argued that “success had spoiled Parisian art,” which was “effeminate and altogether
unsuited to confront the violent dangers in store for Western Culture.” Jackson Pollock’s “action” paintings, then, were the bold reply to Paul Cézanne’s soft apples and pears. As Aldous Huxley described early-modern French art, those still lifes had become equated with passivity and contemplation, an attitude, we are supposed to believe, that led to occupation. French culture, like France itself, had become vulnerable. According to this logic, the Cold War required a more insurgent art form that abandoned the complacency offered by old Europe.

What is fascinating about this argument is the way in which it affirms larger international discourses concerning Europe’s economic future. For if Paris needed America, America also needed Paris. The expansion of U.S. markets and the selling of American culture were ultimately tempered or balanced by America’s anxieties over its cultural vacuity. The U.S.’s altruistic impulses, as well as concern among critics regarding its exportable kitsch, thus became a projection of U.S. cultural anxieties, an expression of its continuing reliance on (and consumption of) European culture. In other words, critics had to rebuild and dismiss a Cézanne to create a Pollock.

**Hollywood and Billy Wilder.** To understand these cultural and economic anxieties, we might begin with Hollywood, which had historically employed Western European immigrant talent, bridging the European and American cultural divide. Many European artists left Nazi Europe for the lucrative promises of Hollywood. These writers, actors, and directors found themselves under contract at Hollywood studios, where their cultural capital was incorporated into Hollywood’s classic aesthetic. Thus, National Socialist Europe was good for Hollywood, which became a haven for the continuous supply of pre- and postwar émigrés. European “aura” then infected even “reproducible” Hollywood, adding art value to this aesthetic enterprise.

Billy Wilder’s postwar films, including *A Foreign Affair* (1948), *Sabrina*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), and *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), all wrestle with issues of internationalism, linking American cultural production to Cold War foreign relations. Emily Rosenberg has documented how *A Foreign Affair* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* engage America’s new diplomatic role after World War II. She argues that these films revolve around the prolonged pun of “foreign affairs,” a pun situated within a history of U.S. sexualization of its foreign policy. *A Foreign Affair* espouses an isolationist position by figuring Europe within the Marlene Dietrich role as an evil, conniving seductress. (The film’s production and release coincided with the formation of NATO as well as preliminary negotiations over the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT].) *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* narrativizes the need for American (“male”) responsibility, leadership, and protection at home and abroad—an ideology that helped inform U.S. economic intervention in Western Europe. These films responded to a liberal postwar internationalism that “venerated those gender and sexual values and roles that World War II enshrined”: male bonding, leadership, and domestic security.

Yet Wilder’s films do not offer easy answers regarding the United States’s emerging economic and cultural internationalism or firmly established gender roles
(Wilder was after all the director of the gender-bending *Some Like It Hot* [1959]). Rather, Wilder’s Cinderella films question the romance and potential “marriage” of U.S. and Western European markets. Even the films made after the mid-1950s, which illustrated the European embrace of American protection, are bittersweet romances, tinged by the losses inherent in such forced relations.

Part of this ambiguity may stem from Wilder’s own vexed history as an Austrian Jewish immigrant who fled fascist Germany. After writing and directing in Hollywood for a decade, Wilder covered World War II as an American war correspondent. While safe in Europe in an American uniform, he discovered that his entire extended family had been killed at Auschwitz. The American-Europe divide thus resonated more profoundly for Wilder. His films reflect the Jewish émigré’s cynical evaluation of the blinding imperialist tendencies of postwar America. Like Douglas Sirk, Wilder seemed to luxuriate in Hollywood narrative practices while simultaneously critiquing American myths of upward mobility, rabid postwar consumerism, and industrial imperialism. His films marvel at the booming American economy while foregrounding the losses within such a boom.

Wilder also demonstrated that Europe was at times complicit in its World War II and postwar takeover. After the war, treaty and trade negotiations between Western European nations and the United States often compromised various national cinemas, particularly in France, whose integrity was subordinated to economic interests favoring U.S. commerce. As if to illustrate Europe’s pliant position, his films proliferate with European orphan girls who too readily give in to American wooing. And, for all their crass, brusque economic imperialism, Wilder’s American moguls often have a naive vulnerability; they seem charmingly immune to European cultural splendors.

In Wilder’s *Love in the Afternoon*, for example, American entrepreneur Frank Flannagan (Gary Cooper) offers to pave over the Venetian canals (which today face extinction as a result of flooding and Venice’s inability to “change” with the times), preferring marketable and viable transportation networks to decaying historical structures. Flannagan also admits to his French girlfriend, Arianne (Audrey Hepburn), that he is bored with the Paris Opera’s staging of *Tristan und Isolde*. The reference to Richard Wagner’s romantic-tragic opera, a love story that involves national betrayal, reminds us of how songs (culture) play a part in political and economic national struggles, how they (and other cultural productions such as Hollywood films) are used to instruct, inform, and modify national identities. That Flannagan prefers showgirls to Wagner is significant, given the history surrounding the appropriation of Wagner by the Nazis. After all, Nuremberg rallies melded a Rockettes showgirl aesthetic with the operatic.

In a sense, then, Wilder is himself Frank Flannagan. In effect, like Flannagan (who is continually identified as the Pepsi man; Chevalier even sings a popular Pepsi jingle when referring to him), Wilder profited from American mass culture. However, Wilder also continually reminds us of the many traditions, good and bad, left behind, like Isolde. When Audrey Hepburn’s character summarizes Flannagan as American to one of her French friends, we can hear Wilder commenting on his own alienated relationship to American culture and politics: “[Flannagan] is invulnerable.
Very odd people. When they are very young they have their teeth straightened, their tonsils taken out, and gallons of vitamins pumped into them. Something happens to their insides. They become immunized, mechanized, air-conditioned, and hydromatic. Not even sure he has a heart.” Yet Arianne still falls for him, running alongside his train in the famous, and last, torturous scene.

Wilder’s other Cinderella films, lingering on these ambiguities that resist being easily wrapped up by the romance narrative and that bring us back to larger political and cultural ambiguities. They question the very workings of romance but more specifically political romance: “How could Europe fall for America, and what are the consequences?”

The use of Wagner’s famous opera, noted for its shifting tonality, unresolved melody, sexuality, liebestod, and appeal to nationalist movements, provides a meta-commentary on the film’s banal seduction narrative. In that it centers on captivity, seduction, and national betrayal, the opera informs Wilder’s May-September, Cinderella “foreign affairs”—Sabrina and Love in the Afternoon. Those films tell of the dissolution of national borders as romantic betrayal, as a collusion on both sides (Isolde loves the pitchman, not the nation; Tristan loves the captive woman whose husband he has killed and who is ultimately dependent on him for her safe passage). The “slave”—the woman who has been ravaged by war, by foreign relations—becomes the narrative pivot, a pawn in the homosocial relations of men. This “subordinated” woman—wooed into collaboration—may stand in for Vichy France’s (collaboration/occupation) “marriage” to the Nazis, but this figure also helps narrativize the Marshall Plan’s subordination of Europe to the U.S. as a seductive economic hegemony.

Amid the film’s layering of political and romantic intrigue, we may thus read the historically naïve Frank Flannagan, who is oblivious to the spell of Europe’s cultural mythology, as both an exciting and a terrifying figure. On one hand, Flannagan seems immune to the meta-narratives that informed the Holocaust (he could care less about Wagner, a sacred national culture, and the domestic struggles/poverty that fueled the Holocaust). On the other hand, his desire to pave Venice’s canals and for showgirls over opera divas suggests that he wants to make ready for tourists or to obliterate, however ambivalently, the cultures that Hitler, Churchill, and Mussolini struggled to preserve and for which many Jews gave their lives. From this position, U.S. capital is an antidote to fascism, for it stands outside Europe’s corrupted high culture, oblivious to fascism’s national cues. However, in the figure of Frank Flannagan, U.S. capital destroys in a different vein: his is a viral obliteration of all distinct national cultures, not merely an usurpation of countries under the banner of unification. The film asks us to wonder what else Flannagan (capital) will pave over, in addition to the canals and the women whom he seduces and disposes of, as part of “raising the standard” of living in depressed foreign countries. The film thus seems uncomfortable with a highbrow Europe, which produced not only a Cézanne but also a revered Wagner, while simultaneously mourning the loss of Europe’s distinct national cultures. As Flannagan’s girlfriend, Arianne, reminds Flannagan, Wagner has “more musical merit” than the follies, to which he replies, “Yeah, but did you see that chorus? Not a dame up there that weighs less than 250
pounds.” A country’s culture thus becomes equated with the women who showcase it, an apt description of the period’s foreign policy rhetoric. These May-September romances, an allusion to postwar switches and destabilizations, construct old Europe into a young ingenue and America into a crusty prince.

In his repeated casting of Europeans, some of them with dubious backgrounds, such as Maurice Chevalier (who had entertained Nazis during the war and whose character is equally mercenary within the film’s diegesis) in *Love in the Afternoon*, Wilder is also suspicious of a Hollywood that fetishized Europe and its émigrés. Postwar Hollywood (circa 1947–1962) had a number of foreign starlets—Hepburn, Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Leslie Caron, Brigitte Bardot—who helped translate a soft, desirous exportable culture. Yet, and perhaps not so coincidentally, Hollywood during this period was seemingly devoid of virile, foreign leading men, save perhaps for the less-than-tough Louis Jordan. Those foreign actors (Charles Boyer, Cary Grant, David Niven) who still circulated in 1950s Hollywood were conceived in a different era. Postwar Hollywood presented a different, homegrown image of masculinity inspired by such new talent as James Dean, Marlon Brando, Robert Mitchum, and Montgomery Clift. Hollywood, like New York, favored the tough American who saved the “feminine” European. A Brando or Dean became Hollywood’s version of Pollock, and waning stars such as Peter Lawford signified a “soft” Europe, one eventually wedded, in Lawford’s case, to a Kennedy (and in 1954—the year *Sabrina* was released).

**Hollywood and French Exchanges.** As the Cinderella films suggest, the very notion of Europe that postwar Hollywood proposed was a postcard fantasy. For instance, when the title character Sabrina arrives in France, a circular picture window looks out onto the Eiffel Tower—a mise-en-scène cliché indicating to the viewer that we are in Paris. Thus, we are reminded, Paris has become a one-dimensional, condensed, and packaged marketable export. The window’s circular design mimics the camera’s lens and recalls Hollywood’s tendency to include foreign details as well as talent in its clichés of prestige. This self-referential frame enables many of Wilder’s images to be read ironically. Three years later, in *Love in the Afternoon*, Wilder takes this banal simulation one step further by beginning the film with a shot of a Parisian postcard, which is, of course, of the Eiffel Tower. The tower becomes an infinitely reproducible synecdoche for France, for Europe.

This filmic abbreviation operates as a kind of “patent,” in both senses of the word: Hollywood invents a formula for representing France, a means of controlling/owning and codifying the visual field, as well as rehearses a patent, or obvious visual French cue. French-American film relations after all began over a patent dispute. This quarrel may partially account for the persistent and historical antagonism the French have toward the U.S. film industry. The plot of *Sabrina* alludes to these cultural/economic antagonisms, as it revolves on American takeovers, on doing whatever it takes to secure a deal and a market. The film reflexively suggests Hollywood’s own historical “dealings” with the French film industry and invites speculation on how these disputes intersect with and inform postwar international exchanges.
Given the achievements of Georges Méliès and the Lumière brothers, as well as the marketing and business savvy of Pathé Frères, France in effect helped create and develop many of the greatest achievements of early cinema. As Bill Grantham notes, “By 1908, when the cinema ‘industry’ was just thirteen years old, French film releases, led by Pathé, had captured up to 70 percent of the American market.” However, the French eventually found themselves under attack by a seemingly unscrupulous tide of American film entrepeneurs; the French saw their films confiscated by U.S. Customs and their screenings and demonstrations mysteriously canceled. Grantham summarizes this early-twentieth-century battle between the U.S. and European film industries over a patent dispute:

The industrial attack centered on patents—the intellectual property protection afforded the camera and projection systems on which the competing industrialists depended. . . . In order to run a cinema, it was necessary to ally oneself with one or another competing industrialist. Once that decision was made, the cinema owner could only show films made using that industrialist’s system; everybody else was effectively locked out. In order to drive the French out of the American market, a group of patent holders, led by Thomas Edison, pooled their various camera and project patents and formed the Motion Pictures Patent Co. (MPPC), the main purpose of which was to exclude foreign competition. . . . In just two months, the foreign share of short films in release fell by 25 percentage points.

Although this film cartel was eventually abolished, it helped create an American film hegemony and set in motion the bullying that marked relations between the U.S. and French film industries. During the years after World War I, France’s cinema encountered a series of problems. Its output departed aesthetically from what would become the convention, namely, narrative continuity cinema; Pathé (the French industrial leader) suffered from poor management and declined in importance. The war also took its toll on French output. As Grantham observes, “By 1927, Hollywood films represented more than 60 percent of all films submitted to the French censor for pre-exhibition approval, while the domestic market revenue share of French producers had fallen below 40 percent.” Eventually, as a way of preserving the home market and ensuring national integrity, the French set up a somewhat ineffective quota system that restricted the number of American films allowed to be exhibited in France.

By the time of World War II, the quota system had fallen by the wayside as France faced occupation and isolation. Although filmmakers such as Robert Bresson and Marcel Carné helped reinvigorate French cinema, by 1946, at the close of the war and amid massive rebuilding, France was forced to reopen its doors to American films in exchange for massive loans and credits, reinstating a limited quota system. The French cinema once again fell casualty to American rough trade. According to Grantham, this history of American deal-making and forced control of the French film market coalesced in the pervasive national myth that Americans “used dirty tricks to defeat a world leader that was French.”

This film wrangling only reaffirmed the “cowboy-bully” economic and cultural postwar status of the United States. Yet the French were anything but defeated, for they repeatedly and remarkably rebuilt their film industry once...
again. Indeed, the postwar surge in American film exports ironically aided the French in their most successful transformation and reinvention of their national cinema: the French New Wave, which was deeply influenced by the Hollywood aesthetic and a response to the pervasive presence of Hollywood. Films by François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Jacques Rivette drew from and simultaneously challenged Hollywood conventions. But despite the New Wave’s critical success, Hollywood remained the market winner, if the aesthetic loser. It was the larger rift between the U.S. and France—over nation, culture (both film and art), the control of the means of production, and the unmoored European (who finds “herself” wooed, seduced, and ultimately prostituted by American capital)—that was at the heart of postwar foreign relations discourses. Billy Wilder’s films bemoan the effects of what we now term “globalization” while expressing resistance to the process, by focusing on distinct—if not eventually absorbed—national identities.

Sabrina fixates on its title character as a European émigré (literally since its star, Audrey Hepburn, was a Belgian World War II refugee) and on her ability to export and teach the lessons offered by Europe. Thus, French cooking, poetry, fashion, romance, and style become the film’s antidote to America’s buy-and-sell culture. Postwar France is a glamorous ingenue waiting to be consumed, her cultural capital vital to postwar America’s emerging cultural hegemony.

On the literal level, Sabrina is the story of the daughter of a British chauffeur who drives for wealthy industrialists, the Larrabees. As a teenager, Sabrina goes to the Paris Cordon Bleu and later returns to the Long Island estate of her father’s employer as a “displaced” person. She is a Cinderella in search of a ball to attend. In the film’s terms, she exists outside the economy of the Larrabee estate; too adult to be a chauffeur’s daughter yet definitely not a servant, she adopts the role of the culturally desirable European other. She constantly circulates within the film as an object of desire, someone to be gazed upon, purchased, traded, and ultimately bedded/wedded to industrialist Linus Larrabee, the stiff and aging heir played by Humphrey Bogart.

Bogart was an interesting casting choice since he was immediately associated with a tradition of rugged American cowboy individualism forced in Casablanca (Michael Curtiz, 1941) into a liaison with foreign diplomats. As Rick Blaine, Bogart begins that film as an isolationist American. Yet, when imposed upon by his former foreign lover, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman), who is both temptress and girl in need, Rick becomes the man of action and enters into foreign relations. A reluctant but heroic internationalist, Bogart’s Rick comes to signify an America that grudgingly entered into the war.

As Linus Larrabee, Bogart is still the internationalist, but Wilder illustrates the ironic underside of the heroic image of American intervention shown in Casablanca. Linus sees other countries in merely transactional terms; he travels to Iraq for oil deals, and although he occasionally stops in Paris, he never leaves the airport. Linus’s unmarried status—his resistance to romantic involvement—recalls Rick’s isolationism. By film’s end, however, Linus sails off with Sabrina to Europe, engaged to both the girl and the Continent.
Foreign relations here no longer signify an honorable fight, a romance with Europe in order to dispel Nazi totalitarianism and imperialism. In Sabrina’s terms, American foreign relations are inextricably linked to cultural and economic imperialism. The era’s global logic centered on productionism: “producing the largest volume of specialized goods for sale in the widest possible world market.” Local, national economies thus take second place to the greater good of the world economy.

The film’s narrative makes clear that the wooing of Sabrina is merely the means to the end of a merger. However, as part of Larrabee’s “domestic” economy, she stands in the way of that larger merger. Desired by both Larrabee brothers, David and later Linus, Sabrina is complicating Larrabee Industries’ plans for David to marry the daughter of Linus’s merger partner. Initially, Linus woos Sabrina in order to get her out of the way, to secure David’s marriage and the merger. Sabrina must be bought out by romance, her cultural capital subsumed, if Larrabee Industries is to expand. The means of postwar production and expansion thus consume/subsume all other social relations.

David Larrabee eventually questions Linus’s desire for more capital: “Why more money? Why secure a new multi-million dollar plastics merger?” Why must he marry to ensure such an acquisition? Linus responds, “So a new industry goes up in an underdeveloped area and once barefooted kids have shoes, washed faces, and their teeth fixed.” Linus’s pat, pedantic reply evokes a scene from Charles Dickens or an Italian neorealist film, say from Paisan (Roberto Rossellini, 1946): a black-and-white image of dirty foreign children begging American soldiers for help, the same soldiers who helped bomb the children’s cities. And let us not forget that industrial and market expansion, aiming for higher levels of international exchange and “welfare,” was intended to “benefit American producers who could compete vigorously in any market where the ‘open door’ and the free convertibility of currencies into dollars facilitated equal access.” So teeth and American dollars point to the site of international consumption: fix their teeth and they will surely consume.

Dental hygiene jokes proliferate in Sabrina, exposing the hubris of an American stereotype that reduces Europeans (and its recent émigrés) to “those with bad teeth.” Such jokes mock an America obsessed with white teeth and hygiene and perhaps refer to the slave status of tottering Europe, chained to American commodities. As Kristin Ross has suggested, in France images of the clean household filled with shiny new appliances and sparkling housewives worked to reconstruct the national identity—one devoid of “dirty” occupation and colonization policies. This hygienically sealed, decolonized identity was indelibly tied to American consumer durables. One need only remember Richard Nixon’s famed kitchen debate with Nikita Khruschev to be reminded of the virtues of a hygienic American Cold War capitalism that, as Elaine Tyler May has argued, marketed the spotless American home and housewife as signifiers of the affluence of American/democratic capitalism. If American hygiene proved capitalism was superior, then it also helped reintegrate postwar Europe. French and American exchanges thus dominated not only economic but also cultural transactions during the postwar period. The clean American home and woman promised modernization and mobility, luring foreign markets and Communist governments to a commodity-rich American lifestyle.
According to Ross, French mass culture highlighted state-led modernization/Americanization, shifting the focus from decolonization to the new, modern domestic space. According to Alan S. Milard, Marshall Plan aid maintained the flow of imported capital goods. The ultimate purpose was to develop a “bloc of states which would share similar political, social, economic and cultural values to those which the United States itself publicly valued and claimed to uphold.” Domestic hygiene for both countries became a means of restructuring foreign relations: the United States colonized through commodity relations (through shiny refrigerators), whereas France decolonized after occupation and refocused its energies on filling the home front with consumer durables, ushering in a new era of isolationism. For both countries, the woman as housewife, signifier of cultural stability, marked these dramatic shifts in diplomacy. Kristin Ross describes these shifts in France:

In the roughly ten-year period of the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s in France—the decade that saw both the end of the empire and the surge in French consumption and modernization—the colonies are in some sense “replaced,” and the effort that once went into maintaining and disciplining a colonial people and situation becomes instead concentrated on a particular “level” of metropolitan existence: everyday life. And women, of course, as the primary victims and arbiters of social reproduction, as the subjects of everydayness and as those most subjected to it, as the class of people most responsible for consumption, and those responsible for the complex movement whereby the social existence of human beings is produced and reproduced, are the everyday: its managers, its embodiment.

Women as mothers, wives, pliant consumers, and country were then re-“vamped”; these women recast relations between the U.S. and France.

Linus’s quip about foreigners needing dental hygiene, combined with Sabrina’s fetishized status and the references to her own perfect (dental) hygiene, is telling given the desire for postoccupation France to be hygienically sealed in American exports. His comment reminds us that Sabrina represents both old and new France: the older, distinct French culture (we see her cooking soufflés), as well as the new, Americanized, sparkling-toothed promise of postwar France. Sabrina negotiates these conflicting images as she eventually finds herself “sealed” within or “consumed” by the Larrabees’ estate. Her story reminds us that people are more than a set of dirty teeth and France is more than just a postcard image of the Eiffel Tower.

Sabrina is a completely enigmatic figure. As father Larrabee comments, how can a chauffeur’s daughter be named Sabrina? The father articulates a single instance of several paradoxical threads in Sabrina’s character. She is “just a girl” (a meager chauffeur’s daughter) and thus coded as nonthreatening, a far cry from the image of Europe as a beguiling seductress. Yet she creates chaos in her wake once she has been recoded as European. Such mayhem seems overdetermined, given her vulnerable, girlish persona. She stands as the wrench in the Larrabee system—the excess component in this efficient production—and perhaps the still-pervasive aura surrounding Europe: its ability to captivate and hold Americans captive. This aura is inherently inefficient, as is Sabrina’s narrative position, in that
Sabrina holds up to Linus the talisman of “unproductive” living: the desire for long walks along the Seine and for long suppers at chic restaurants—for pure leisure. She is a reminder of an “older” nationalism that stands outside the logic of globalization as well as the desire for a leisure culture (consumerism) “married” to American corporate capitalism.

Sabrina ultimately acknowledges her own conscription into the new world order, into the Larrabees’ economy. Sabrina’s opening voice-over ironically introduces, in stage-direction fashion, the ways in which 1950s affluence had an underside, an unmentionable labor class. Audrey Hepburn’s voice adjoins a series of establishing shots that narrate and make visible the vacant affluence permeating the Larrabees’ Long Island estate. This sequence also suggests the opening tableaux of the decaying Xanadu in Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) and the devastated Mandalay in Rebecca (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940). Both films begin with a series of interior shots that never fully penetrate the wealth or the logic behind excessive accumulation. [Much like the gloomy voice-over opening of Rebecca, another May-September romance, Sabrina’s voice-over is unmistakably jaded, suggesting not fascination but boredom with ostentatious luxury. Her disembodied voice permeates the Larrabees’ wealth and belies her potential as both laborer and object to be consumed; she has tended to and participated in this luxury. In this fairy-tale world, Sabrina describes a space filled with unused luxuries: “an outdoor tennis court, an indoor tennis court/an outdoor swimming pool, an indoor swimming pool.” This linguistic volley suggests that commodities cover every possible Larrabee space. The family’s estate revolves around control, or, as Sabrina reminds us, “It never rained at the Larrabee parties, the Larrabees wouldn’t have it.” Such control bespeaks their desire to reproduce their wealth in spectacular fashion, both to show and to tell. Yet within this land of named luxuries exist unnamed individuals who attend the Larrabees: those who “scrub the bottom of the sailboats” and the “man with no particular title who tends a goldfish named ‘George.’”

Sabrina continually mocks Linus’s authority and thus the logic of postwar conversion (and its intricately drawn divisions). For instance, while visiting Linus’s office, Sabrina proceeds to spin in a boardroom chair—the head chair, Linus’s chair. Like an out-of-control top, she turns around and around, destroying all sense of control. Her spinning reflects her own vacillations between the Larrabee brothers and the estate’s divided space (family/servants’ quarters). The boardroom’s space represents the larger economy, where there always appear to be distinct winners and losers sitting on opposite sides of the table. By turning, Sabrina also calls attention to the complex machinations and manipulations that occur at this table.

Sabrina’s movement also alludes to the jostling cultural landscape following the war, when many displaced Eastern and Western Europeans migrated to the United States. Sabrina’s father reminds Linus that she is “just a displaced person: she doesn’t belong in a mansion, but then she doesn’t belong above a garage either.” Sabrina’s orbital movement thus punctuates not only her “dizzying” effect on the Larrabee household but also the role postwar émigrés had on the cultural landscape of the United States.
Sabrina is a displaced person (DP) not unlike Audrey Hepburn, who was herself a DP lured to the U.S. by Hollywood. However, Sabrina’s status as displaced person refers not only to the numerous dislocated and out-of-work nationals who jostled in and out of the U.S. but to the European economies that were subjected to foreign currency controls during the postwar conversion (when the American dollar became the standard).

_Sabrina_ bemoans these cultural (and concomitant economic) exchanges, suggesting that inevitably cultural uniqueness would be lost. For instance, desiring a distinctly French education, Sabrina enrolls at the Paris Cordon Bleu to gain culinary/cultural authenticity. However, Sabrina finds the cooking school has come to resemble an American automobile plant where cooks are produced on an assembly line and then sent abroad (fig. 1). The film thus serves up an acerbic portrait of French culture as irrevocably influenced by fascism and Fordism; the scene suggests that France’s most sacred cultural artifact—its cuisine—is now constructed in the American way and sold to an eager international (American) market.

This scene draws on the rationality of National Socialism, giving way to an eerie reading of Nazi death camps as having mimicked efficient kitchens, as a logical extension of American-style Fordism (“home economics” was after all an

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Figure 1. Sabrina presents her soufflé for inspection at the Cordon Bleu, an efficient Fordist factory where cooks line up in front of their ovens. _Sabrina_ (Billy Wilder, 1954). Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
application of Taylorism). Indeed, since much of Wilder’s family died at Auschwitz, he had firsthand knowledge of its rationalized atrocities. From this perspective, the chef at Cordon Bleu who gives exacting orders regarding the size, shape, and feel of a soufflé reminds us of the Nazi fixation with methodical control over “beauty.” The Cordon Bleu’s efficient space, filled with rows of ovens, suggests other World War II “ovens” as well as the effects of the American-style Fordism that informed not only the Nazi extermination projects but also the efficient Hollywood studio system in which Wilder flourished.

Given the film’s complicated international exchanges and consolidations, Linus’s altruistic desire to “help” foreign countries seems absurd, especially when we consider his complete detachment from the labor that surrounds him, from his chauffeur to his secretary to Sabrina. The film’s mise-en-scène shores up this irony by presenting Linus as removed from the world in his high-rise office building, as absorbed by capital and its clichés. In Linus’s office, an Alexander Calder mobile hangs from the ceiling and a Joan Miróesque painting sits on his salon wall staring at numerous gadgets: a speaker phone, electric doors, and lights; a row of secretaries lines the outer wall to his office. The office space suggests the sterility and efficiency of an invasive Fordist modernism.

Linus collects paintings, secretaries, and foreign markets yet he never seems to know or experience these things. Crunching orders to an obedient secretary, Linus is part of the sterile and mechanized terrain of his office. Intrigued by nonrepresentational art, produced by the French (Miró) or expatriate Americans (Calder), he neglects the people around him. His secretary and chauffeur speak to him of their worries, but he ignores them as he interrupts or distractedly reads a paper. And, although he speaks of underprivileged children, he never encounters these children. He thus represents postwar fears of systemization, the fear of huge corporations and the Cold War meta-narratives that hang over him like the cold Calder mobile. Although by film’s end Linus is softened by his relationship with Sabrina, it is the portrait of him as the paradigmatic American industrialist/imperialist that sticks. Bogart, from Rick Blaine to Linus Larrabee, suggests the shifting ethos of an American multinational. Linus is to be feared, for without a Sabrina he might very well consume the world without ever looking up from his desk.

As depicted in the film, American capitalism is a bully sorely in need of Europe’s “feminization” and seems to foreshadow later images of American capital, namely men like Bill Gates who never have to leave their homes, never mind their offices, to control vast global empires. Accordingly, postwar High Fordism is shown to be about the appropriation of labor and cultural capital, which, in the figure of Sabrina, become blurred. The film reminds us that limousines require chauffeurs. Indeed, the limousine is a recurring class metaphor; for Americans, it is just as easy to import a British chauffeur to drive the Rolls-Royce. Sabrina’s father, Fairchild, equates the limousine with society: there is “a front seat, a back seat, and a window in between.” His is a European vision of a clearly autonomous and stratified class structure; for him, the limousine’s space represents a distance firmly separated that constitutes one’s social position. Yet the back and front seats often converge
within the film’s narrative—and even though Linus sits in the back seat, he needs a Fairchild to control and drive the car.

Class itself seems dislocated in the film. For instance, once Sabrina has the proper dress and accent (and it is through education that she acquires—is interpellated into—this culturally desirable position), she figuratively and literally moves into the back seat. After her return from Europe, Sabrina attends a Larrabee party where she is unrecognized by the Larrabee elders. She dances comfortably with David Larrabee; as one observer notes, her dress and dancing indicate that “she belongs up there” as “the most sophisticated woman at the ball.” And if these cultural codes indicate class, then Sabrina does indeed belong up there, and the barrier between servant and Larrabee momentarily dissolves. In this same scene, while serving at the party, one of the Larrabee stewards sees Sabrina dancing and runs away to tell the other servants of her apparent rise. As he does so, he shoves an hors d’oeuvres tray into a guest’s hands. The surprised guest finds himself in the position of server, for both guest and server wear the same outfit, a tuxedo. Only the tray of hors d’oeuvres (labor’s marker) separates the server from the guest, the server from the served. To punctuate this joke, each guest in a row of guests takes a drink and hors d’oeuvre from the bewildered guest-as-server.

In these switches, the film’s narrative exposes the ways in which High Fordist class categories, newly lodged in consuming practices and the acquisition of cultural capital, destabilize once-entrenched boundaries. A waiter and a guest look the same; Sabrina dresses, dances, and speaks as well as, if not better than, a Larrabee. Can a servant purchase the signifiers of prestige and “pass” as a Larrabee? What are the effects of postwar legislation, such as the GI Bill, which expand educational opportunities, thereby lowering class barriers or the limousine’s window? Guest becomes waiter as European becomes American. Can an American export European markers of taste and style to succeed as an economic, military, and cultural power? Is French cultural insularity and uniqueness forever made vulnerable by postwar economic treaties and the reorganization of nation and capital dependent on U.S. aid?

Reminiscent of Henry James’s The American, in which an American capitalist goes to France and purchases copies of French paintings as well as a dispossessed French girl for his cultural repertoire, Wilder’s Cinderella films wrestle with a newly emerging gendered internationalist ideology tied to cultural transactions. Just as Henry James responded to the Industrial Revolution and an American cultural identity tied to foreign cultural capital/purchases, these films respond to America’s emerging geopolitical postwar presence amid the fractious Cold War. Both pivot on the image of the dispossessed girl as a national abstraction for foreign relations between two countries. James and Wilder point to the U.S.’s persistent and anxious desire to please Europe—a desire that reached its summit in the mobile postwar years. Yet this desire is ultimately cast in terms of sexual relations between the economic aggressor and the vulnerable, culturally desirable other. Moreover, these patterns find their expression in a new economy in which taste, habits, and purchasable cultural knowledge designate class, the means by which postwar Americans may achieve mobility. While James’s American can only hope
to secure status through European purchases, Linus Larrabee has indeed achieved an international position (he simulates the very rapacious appetites of American capital), given a shattered and dependent world economy. He has achieved this status through economic and cultural expansion, while potentially obliterating cultural/national boundaries. For Linus, France is merely another airport; Sabrina, however, reminds him of the particularity of French nationhood.

Focusing on the losses and gains within such expansion and consumption, Sabrina also narrativizes postwar France’s fascination with America vis-à-vis Hollywood movies. The Larrabee parties become a flickering film screen, a moving shop window for Sabrina’s many fantasies of upward mobility. As a child, Sabrina watches and consumes these parties from high in a tree—a scene that prefigures her eventual status as the primary watched and consumed object in the film.

Like other European spectators, Sabrina buys into the Larrabee narrative. Their parties act out a Hollywood-style fantasy for the rapt, hungry spectator. Yet, amid the display and consumption, Sabrina writes in a letter of her desire to escape from the hold of the Cinderella narrative. She admits to her father that Paris taught her not only how to cook soufflés but also how to “be in the world and of the world and not just stand aside and watch.” Although her letter expresses a utopian illusion of self-determination (especially when we consider her eventual absorption into the Larrabee estate), it nevertheless calls attention to the spectator-participant divide. In essence, Sabrina wants to be a part of the cultural grammar of Europe—“in and of” a social and cultural repertoire—but, ironically, she wants to move from spectator to object (here the object of a preposition), not a subject.

The film notes these changes as part of the metamorphosis of its Cinderella figure. The inevitable Cinderella makeover finds the “useful” girl turning into an “exchangeable” woman. She does so by “putting on” the right clothes. Wilder’s and the 1950s fascination with the Cinderella narrative (from Gigi [1958] to Gidget [1959]) bespeaks the era’s own desire for a makeover. As we watch Sabrina evolve from being an awkward, barefoot émigré’s daughter to being a foreign-inspired “American” beauty, the U.S.’s own recent history finds expression—from Depression, war, and reconversion to “boom” or, diplomatically, from provincial isolationist to global world power.

Sabrina channels this export/import globalization logic. Of European descent yet raised in America, she moves back and forth and finally “remakes” herself on her last trip to the Continent. The film begs us to wonder exactly what her cultural origins are. Sabrina is a blank page, an open script, as she falls or shuttles between cultural/national domains, suggesting the collapsing boundaries after the war. She becomes a buffer figure in the film’s terms, the perfect marriage between French Continental and American mythologies. Sabrina is simultaneously exotic and banal (as is Hepburn), suggesting a new American persona: homespun/international, simple/savvy, and hard working (working class)/leisure oriented. Her “conversion” into an either/or figure reminds us of or brings us back to Jackson Pollock’s paintings, which can be read either as “just” paint drips on a canvas or as America’s ecstatic painting id finally unleashed.
Sabrina also suggests the makeover of the Hollywood aesthetic. Much has been made of the film’s use of French couture (Givenchy) fashions to create the quintessential Hepburn look (fig. 2). Sabrina represents the first full-scale use of European fashions, documenting the decline of studio control over costumes and the eclipse of the costume designer’s role. In this case, Hollywood purchased French fashions to make over the Hollywood look, enunciating its long-term relationship to the European market. These new fashions respond to their larger political context. Thus,
Hollywood, like the U.S., moves from a provincial (in-studio) aesthetic to being an international player/figure. Audrey Hepburn’s look is central to this new aesthetic. Where Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell are grain-fed, “booming” beauties, Hepburn’s body and “face,” to recall Roland Barthes’s famous musing, suggests something entirely different. Hepburn’s body is so thin, so “hungry” looking, as to recall the then-popular image of a ravaged Europe. It also suggests the mannequin’s body, the perfect figure for costuming. Hepburn literalizes the department store mannequin look, an apt figuration for postwar consumer logic. Hepburn’s body becomes the clothes she wears. Yet her face is unique, alive in its movements (the sideways glances, the tilt of her head, the flirtatious smile), reminding us of the distinctiveness of old Europe itself.

As Pierre Bourdieu summarizes this logic, “Nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than . . . the principles of a ‘pure’ aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress, or decoration.” Hepburn as Sabrina performs such a pure aesthetic: the Givenchy fashions, the simple, cropped hairstyle, and the tasteful gold earrings. Aesthetically, Sabrina comes “closer to heaven” than the garish Larrabees, whose parties display more than anything an awkward Long Island demimonde—with its clumsy, giggling society girls and its ostentatious display of diamonds (including tiaras and other affectations of royalty). If, as Sabrina confesses in ironic voice-over, the Larrabees’ world was “as close to heaven as one could get on Long Island,” then Wilder’s mise-en-scène reminds us that Long Island is far from heaven. The Larrabee household reminds us that 1950s national culture is partly a glossy reproduction of prewar Europe.

The film enjoys this “reproduction” pun when the camera introduces the Larrabees as they sit for a family photograph, thus posing for two cameras. To compound this visual layering, on the background wall hangs an earlier family portrait, a painting. This series of portraiture—from painting to photograph to film—produces a mise-en-abyme that alludes to the space of reproduction. After all, the photo does not necessarily replace the painting but merely updates it. The Larrabees represent themselves in the older “auratic” work of art as well as in the mass-culture currency of the photograph. In other words, they may be able to afford the “original” painting, which recalls European ancestral halls, but in a modern postwar world, devoted to flexible, easily produced products such as plastic, they prefer the photograph.

Original paintings and the Sabrinas of the world authenticate the Larrabees’ enterprise, namely plastics—a commodity that more than anything replaced (reproduced) glass in a lighter, more flexible, and less expensive product. After sitting on a pair of champagne glasses, David Larrabee reminds Linus of the mass appeal of plastic when he suggests that the family factory begin work on the construction of unbreakable, plastic champagne glasses. It is the mass-produced good—plastic or the Hollywood Cinderella romance—that secures and maintains America’s economic and political hegemony.

The film here comments on the symbiotic, if not mirroring, relationship between America’s disposable mass culture and its consumer durables. Fredric Jameson describes the incredible influence and power American mass “reproducible” culture has had on world economies since World War II:
The becoming cultural of the economic, and the becoming economic of the cultural, has often been identified as one of the features that characterizes what is widely known as postmodernity. In any case, it has fundamental consequences on mass culture as such. The GATT talks are there to remind us that American film and television fall under base and superstructure alike, as it were; they are economics fully as much as they are culture, and are indeed, along with agribusinesses and weapons, the principal economic export of the United States—an enormous source of sheer profit and income.25

This mise-en-abîme structure predicts and illustrates the logic of America’s increasing emphasis on the exportation of its mass culture as a double-sided, mirroring relation or, as Jameson phrases it, “the becoming economic of the cultural” and vice-versa. In a word, the Larrabees reinvent themselves, from painting to reproduction, as their empire moves from work in New York real estate to global plastics mergers. The Linus Larrabee in the family photo helps sell the plastic (as Bogart sells the image of rugged American capital within the film). The photograph is as exportable as Linus’s plastic; Linus can sell the Larrabee name and family image alongside his resilient new product.

The Larrabees, much like the postwar United States, base their new global order on a manufactured good that Linus pitches in cinematic terms. And it is the cinema, along with Linus’s bazooka-proof plastic, that is today “the principal economic export of the United States.” The cinema and the cult of the photograph help produce global desire for American products; Sabrina narrates these collaborative late-capital cultural and economic exigencies.

Sabrina both attends to this Larrabee/post-reconversion luxury and, as the voice-over suggests, exposes it (she is also ultimately consumed by it). Barefoot, as her father’s assistant in America, she washes the Larrabees’ numerous automobiles and later changes their spark plugs. These opening sequences call attention to the rear-guard servants who support the Larrabee lifestyle, thus foregrounding those spaces inhabited by labor. Yet later, while in Paris, Sabrina is befriended by a wealthy, elderly baron who teaches her about opera, fashion, and European culture. Sabrina then becomes immersed within a Parisian elite, reborn in a postwar Europe seemingly devoid of Wall Street’s influence. The film conjures up a utopian Paris opposed to American materialism yet one that must inevitably be wedded to U.S. capital.

Sabrina thus returns to the Long Island estate, made over into a European Cinderella. David Larrabee chases her; Linus then steals her away. Linus gives her back to David; David gives her back to Linus. At the end of the film, David Larrabee appears at a board meeting and tells an unsuspecting Linus that, after being passed around, Sabrina is now traveling alone, back to Europe. David thus wrests control of Larrabee Industries, allowing the befuddled Linus to meet his unsuspecting Sabrina. Linus ultimately loses control of both himself and Larrabee Industries. In essence, he gets conned by his own con. This shift links Linus’s happiness to a loss of control. Linus thus finds himself (like David) susceptible to the lure of the European. These last two exchanges happen without Sabrina’s knowledge; she is passed around without even being around.

Like all Cinderellas, Sabrina becomes a gift to her prince, a passive participant in a larger economic transaction. And if she is the gift, the complicit David,
Linus, old man Larrabee, and even her father are the givers. Linus “deals with” her father in the limousine, with David and old man Larrabee in the Larrabee boardroom. After all is said and done, David finally arranges for Linus’s “takeover” or “merger” with Sabrina at the end of the film. She is a gift to Linus for his accomplishments. Sabrina suggests that the exchange of women occurs when they take part in maintaining historically situated economic and social relations. Gayle Rubin has described such “traffic” in women:

If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. . . . As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization.26 The social bond between men, between capital, supersedes Sabrina’s needs. She is a body, a woman, given up in a circuit of exchange. She assures Linus’s status in a postwar America still awed by European cultural capital. Paris stands in for Sabrina as Sabrina stands in for Paris. She is a “feminine” Europe, a gift to a United States that somehow needs this orphaned elite to bolster its new political, cultural, and economic ascendancy. And postwar America had learned to exchange, to make gifts of, and to receive various pieces of Western Europe for the purpose of “social organization.” According to the logic of Cold War U.S. diplomacy, “the rest of the world would win more than it would lose by acquiescing in American hegemony; greater security and material rewards in exchange for diminished autonomy.”27 At the film’s end, Linus sails with Sabrina on the ship Liberté back to France. Both presumably are “free”—wedded to a future in which European and American economies and culture are united. The softer and kinder Linus needs his Sabrina, the feminine underside to the mighty hand of capital, the soft soufflé cooked in a plastics merger.

From New Internationalism to Globalization. Wilder’s postwar Cinderella films anxiously negotiate America’s cultural role in a new world order organized around U.S. political and economic hegemony. The country’s emerging international role made for an awkward adjustment as even American industrial-economic superiority was a complicated, fortuitous, and recent event. Thomas McCormick summarizes:

America’s industry was the most rationalized in the world. It . . . enjoyed advantages over all its goal competitors in all of the high-value product lines; steel, farm machinery, machine tools, electrical equipment, construction machinery, automobiles, and tracks. Only in the less profitable lines of nondurable consumer goods, such as textiles, was it unable consistently to out-produce and out-sell its commercial rivals. Compounding U.S. economic supremacy, the American farm belt, in the face of the war’s devastation on European agriculture, enhanced its historic position as the world system’s major breadbasket. Likewise, American bankers transcended their previous parity with British counterparts as New York clearly surpassed London as the dominant financial center of the world system.28
Amid this meteoric rise, the U.S. worried about its cultural position, the control over its cultural and diplomatic role. As National Socialism had unfortunately illustrated, cultural hegemony was an integral component in securing military and economic superiority. The “becoming economic of the cultural,” as well as the “becoming cultural of the economic,” finds early expression, indeed is narrativized, in these postwar Hollywood films. Linus must marry and incorporate Sabrina as America must merge and acquire new markets. Such a marriage in a global sense can happen only within an integrated market. Thus, the formation of an Eastern and a Western European bloc during the Cold War was not only an ideological concession but also an economic one. It also split up a potentially dangerous Germany while preserving German industrial production. “European integration might provide a way to incorporate Germany into a European system without leaving Germany in control of that system” and, according to a Joint Chiefs of Staff analysis in 1947, “the complete resurgence of German industry . . . is essential for the economic recovery of France—whose security is inseparable from the combined security of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.”

Limited integration, evidenced by the formation of NATO and the Bretton Woods agreement (which introduced the International Monetary Fund and World Bank), helped secure a Europe fiscally dependent momentarily on the United States but free to tend to its own wounds. Full integration would have decimated Western European workers. The protection of domestic policies, such as price controls, social programs, full employment, and other social safety nets, promoted labor’s share of the national income. Nationalistic policies secured labor’s position, as well as cultural integrity, as the French have repeatedly argued. Thus, “European leaders envisioned not a unitary free world but a system divided into compartments (the Americas, the Russian empire, and Europe and its overseas dependents in Asia and Africa).” Western Europe invited U.S. capital seduction and limited integration but wished to remain “unmarried” or to refuse complete market/cultural absorption.

Audrey Hepburn’s first Hollywood film, Roman Holiday (William Wyler, 1953), comments on this postwar tug of war between an integrated European Community (EC) on one side and national autonomy on the other, alluding to what would become a dominant feature of Western European identity formation during the latter half of the twentieth century. Again, Hepburn plays a European girl, this time a princess on an extended press junket promoting an integrated EC. When her character escapes the embassy’s confines in hope of encountering a distinct Italian culture (a culture she wishes will help her become a mature woman), she meets only one Italian man, who happens to be her hairdresser. Eventually, she falls for an American (a foreign correspondent) by the name of Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck). Of course, Bradley—a Hemingway-esque figure—soon has the Hepburn character forgetting about her international “role”: to publicize the dream
of an integrated European trade community. In the end, proclaiming Rome to be her “favorite” city, she promotes the need for a distinctive Roman culture, suggesting a departure from the film’s earlier “integrationist” polemic.

In the film’s terms, Rome represents an individual yet vulnerable national culture—if only one to be preserved for future, iconic American tourists (a position she and Bradley assume). The film thus comments on the logic of globalization (i.e., the slow expansion of American markets to which the call for an EC is a response) and the desire for state individuation in the wake of the expansion of such trade. And perhaps not only the Europeans desire integration and differentiation but also the Americans. The American film viewer desires unlimited access to foreign markets and consumables but also a distinct Rome or Europe to consume. A Rome and/or a Paris cannot remain unique once it has become an American tourist mecca, once its markets have been absorbed.

Roman Holiday comments on this conundrum when it rhetorically mimes a tourist documentary and thereby reminds us of the relationship between film consumership and tourism. As we follow Hepburn and Peck’s characters through the city, Rome becomes yet another European destination, a two-hour tour stop for tourists (with the same tacky-tacky shops that could be in any city, anywhere). This image corresponds to what Jameson has described as the negative theory of globalization or the standardization and unification of everyday life: “By the intermediaries of the great, mostly American-based transnational and multinational corporations, a standard form of American material life, along with North American values and cultural forms, is being systematically transmitted to other cultures.”

Roman Holiday alludes to this Disneyfication of many European cities; they serve as theme parks for foreign travelers, places where local customs are vanquished so that the desires of the ideal American tourist-consumer (or those who believe that a Roman holiday may be experienced in a two-hour movie) could be placated. With today’s integrated EC, the fear remains that national autonomy will be erased and replaced with a homogenized Euro-Disney—a parody of the old.

The GATT—then (1947) and now (1993)—testifies to the continuing anxieties over American internationalism in this world market. A 1947 British Foreign Office memo to Ernest Bevin suggests the tepid climate surrounding GATT: “The idea of the United States of Europe has, of course, long appealed to Americans, who are always prone to accept the naive and uncritical assumption that ideas and institutions that have proven their value here can be exported to provide ready-made for the ills of less fortunate areas of the world.” The memo characterizes U.S. foreign policy in much the same way as Wilder’s films; we can hear the British critique of U.S. cultural/ideological expansion as a critique of Linus’s assertion that Larrabee Industries provides shiny teeth to dirty foreign children. During this new era of internationalism, the export and import of culture are occurring at an alarming rate. And the recent GATT talks, as Jameson reminds us, were designed, in the eyes of American lobbyists, to speed up this rate, “to dismantle all these local and national subsidies (with quotas on the importation of Hollywood television and cinema such as the Television without Frontiers policy) as forms of ‘unfair’ international competition.”
According to a recent issue of *Variety*, French cinema still produces about 130 films a year, commanding around 35 percent of the French filmgoing market. Local productions are supported by public funding and a surplus of yearly television revenues. With the growth of French multiplexes that screen French and American productions side by side, “both French and American films have benefited.” Although the number of French viewers seeing American films has risen, Hollywood’s market share has slipped. To combat this turn in the market, Hollywood has started to produce films in France, and more Hollywood movies star French actors or are shot in French locales yet are told from an American point of view. Hollywood’s desire to make inroads in the French market (and indeed to look more French) revisits the postwar desire to incorporate and denationalize French cultural productions.

**Conclusion: A New Type of Coproduction.** Recent Hollywood films, such as *Green Card* (1990), *Forget Paris* (1995), the remake of *Sabrina* (1995), *French Kiss* (1995), and *An American Werewolf in Paris* (1997), that are set in France, that are remakes of French films (*Green Card*), and/or that star French actors (notably Gérard Depardieu) resolidify Hollywood’s hegemony over the European film market while “looking” more European. Perhaps this new look represents more comfort on America’s part, more confidence in Hollywood codes and their ability to “pass” in Europe. For instance, the Hollywood film *French Kiss* can be read as a response to the GATT quotas, as a way to appease those wanting less Hollywood and more local productions. The film is literally set and was shot in Paris and the French countryside (utilizing on-location French production units) and is a reminder of how Hollywood continues to “patent” itself in relation to foreign culture. The central character, Kate (Meg Ryan), refuses to enact her position as tourist and thus “experience” and “comprehend” France until she sees the Eiffel Tower. Her ambiguous relationship to the film’s location shots and sets reflects the spectator’s experience of the filmic world as, once again, a series of codes, as well as Hollywood’s desire for absolute visual control; in other words, France is not “really” France until we see the Eiffel Tower, until the proper film cliché is inserted. The Renault cars, the “patisserie” shop signs, and the Metro entrance are mere distractions to the larger visual pronouncement of the Eiffel Tower (fig. 3).

The film is an ironic bookend to Wilder’s *Sabrina*, for Kate is the second wave, the 1990s Linus figure, confirming that the new era of globalism is unsexed and thus all the more encompassing. The Meg Ryan character goes to France to retrieve her Canadian fiancé (Timothy Hutton) who, while at a convention in Paris, was wooed by and ran off with a French woman. On the flight over, Kate encounters an impotent French conman, Luc (Kevin Kline), who, through a series of plot twists, will help her win back her Canadian boyfriend. Of course, along the way, Luc and Kate fall in love. As Luc gives into Kate, with renewed potency, Kate falls for both France and Luc. The last scene finds Kate relocating to the French countryside to help operate a vineyard she has financed for Luc (whom she will marry). As the impotent Luc shows us, all of Europe now lacks virility. His virility is directly coded as an extension of French nationalism; he tells Kate to “never touch
my vine." French property and culture here are equated with male sexuality, which gets activated by the American girl with money. Further, the film’s collapsing of (sexual and geographic) borders points to the breakdown of older nationalisms in the face of globalization.

At the beginning of the film, Kate is in the process of becoming a Canadian citizen. By the end, she is going to become a French citizen. However, she remains...
coded as an American. She reminds Luc that she could never love French food (and thus the French), for she is lactose intolerant and cannot enjoy the country’s “452 official government cheeses.” All Americans require is “one hamburger and one restaurant to eat it in,” Luc replies. As if to confirm French suspicions, on a recent several-day visit to Europe, Bill Gates ate each and every meal at McDonald’s. To further this anecdote, Parisian chefs recently rioted in response to an inflationary tax on French cuisine and restaurants (the tax hovers at about 25 percent, while the local McDonald’s pays only 5 percent). American capital either introduces its McDonald’s or absorbs other cultural repertoires.

The finale of French Kiss reminds us of how America “undertakes to incorporate exotic elements from abroad—samurai culture here, South African music there, John Woo films here, Thai food there,” which accounts for why local culture industries (film and television) will probably never supplant Hollywood in a global sense. Kate will absorb the French vineyard (as Northern California has) and marry the French man as long as she holds the proverbial purse strings. The film suggests that perhaps the Eiffel Tower has become more simulation than reality and that French culture can now be found in a Hollywood film set in France (starring Americans playing Frenchmen) or in a fast-food restaurant that sells croissants.

Notes

This essay grew out of a panel presentation at Indiana University’s Conference on Cold War Culture. I would like to thank those who organized, attended, and participated in this session. Special thanks go to Robert B. Ray, James Naremore, Tom Cohen, and Trish Ventura, who offered encouragement and suggested future lines of research. I would also like to express my gratitude to Joe Zimonis and Alan Clinton, who read early drafts of this essay and provided editorial guidance.

4. Ibid., 151.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 61.
13. Ibid., 63.
20. Ibid., 265.
22. Ibid., 79.
31. Ibid., 34.