

FOREIGN CINEMA

Culture Vultures: Why Other Countries Make American Films.

text **Amy Westervelt**

I once overheard a Polish guy in a bar say, “America is the only country where you can walk into a bar in a big city, insult the country, and have people kiss your ass. If you came into my bar in Warsaw and shit on Poland, I’d kick your ass!” Of course, there are plenty of Americans with similar attitudes, but my point here is that the Pole is not alone in his observation. A lot of people in other countries have picked up on this willingness of “sophisticated” America to understand foreign as better, and their film industries are earning praise and profits from it.

The French figured it out first and have been doing it for years. There’s nothing better for an American who wants to seem smart than humbly admitting to having just seen a French film. They’ll pronounce the title well, but not too well, duck their head, and then launch into an explanation of how it’s very New Wave, with a clear nod to Godard, yet firmly rooted in postmodernism. Whether it’s a period piece, along the lines of *The Widow of St. Pierre* or a hip urban



never quite makes it past sultry. Before he discovered the secret of Bellucci, *Maléna* director Giuseppe Tornatore was a salesman of the other key element of exported Italian films—the cute, rambunctious little boy—turning out *Cinema Paradiso* in 1988. In *Il Postino* Bellucci was absent, but director Michael Radford found a suitably stacked replacement and threw in a bicycle and Pablo Neruda to make up for it.

Don’t you just love watching the Brits play “hooligan?” Don’t assume that films like *Snatch*, *Gangster No. 1*, *Sexy Beast* escape this trend because they’re not subtitled. You forget

that to the intellectual and his evil twin, the hipster, there is almost nothing cooler than London. It’s like having a better-looking sibling—you could almost be them, but you’re not, and somehow this near-miss is a much larger gap than the one between you and a supermodel.

Of course, this pot of gold is not for the Euros alone. *Amores Perros* and *Y Tu Mama Tambien* introduced Americans to fast-living fun-loving

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number like *The Dreamlife of Angels*, for the French, selling to American audiences is all about drama—long, slow shots, pouty actresses, tragedy. If pressed, I’d list *Un Homme et Une Femme* as the first of these films. Released in 1966, it’s the tragic tale of two widows—a race-car driver whose wife died from grief upon learning that he might die from injuries sustained in a crash, and a director whose stunt-man husband died during a stunt. Their children go to school together, they meet, almost start an affair, have a one-night stand, but it goes no further because the doe-eyed director still longs for her stunt-man. There’s a not so subtle point made along the way about women loving for life and men for only periods of time. Ah, they’re so passionate, the French!

The Italian film made for the American connoisseur is one part seaside village and cobblestone streets, one part “the simple life,” and two parts Monica Bellucci. Apparently Bellucci’s handlers have realized that no one in Italy will take her films seriously (although everyone goes anyway), so they’ve schlepped gems like *Maléna* over to the wanna-be continentals on this side of the Atlantic. No, I’m not knocking her because I’m jealous (hell, she’s hot, I won’t deny it), it’s because she never speaks, even in her own language, and she’s only got one look that

Mexico, and provided inspiration for a Levi’s campaign—Si Señor. And from the East, films like Tony Bui’s *Three Seasons*, Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* and Wong Kar-wei’s *In the Mood for Love* provide all the slick exoticism Westerners could want. In Kar-wei’s 1930s Hong Kong, Maggie Cheung is the picture of elegant restraint, Tony Leung is repressed and desirable—swap Milla Jovovich for Cheung and Jeremy Irons for Leung and you’ve got yourself a Donna Karan ad.

The illegitimate offspring of such films are the pan-continental ensemble films, wherein well-known film stars speak with ambiguously “foreign” accents in the lead roles, and famous actors from other countries have charming cameos. Bertolucci’s *Stealing Beauty* immediately comes to mind, as does this year’s *The Triumph of Love* (directed by Bertolucci’s wife, Clare Peploe) and *Ma Femme Est Une Actrice* (starring Charlotte Gainsbourg, and directed by her husband). The next link in the chain, these films are even more obviously just American products with foreign wrapping. Although they really should know better, for some reason the cool kids still eat this crap up. It’s like paying \$10 for Kraft because the deli guy put a French sticker on it, and never figuring out that you got screwed. ■