

DONALD MORRISON and ANTOINE COMPAGNON

The Death of French Culture



The Death of French Culture

Donald Morrison
and
Antoine Compagnon

Response by Antoine
by Andrew Brown



polity

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Donald Morrison

I.

Hollywood has a bad reputation among the French. They tend to equate the U.S. movie capital with formulaic thrillers, overmarketed blockbusters, glitzy special effects, and gratuitous violence. But Hollywood's untold secret is that most of the 500 or so feature films it turns out every year are modestly budgeted productions, many of them intelligent and original.

Consider director Ridley Scott's 1991 female-buddy picture *Thelma and Louise*. It cost a relatively low 16 million dollars to make and was nominated for six Oscars (winning one, for best screenplay), eight British BAFTAs and a French César. Like any good movie, *Thelma and Louise* has its share of surprises. In a pivotal scene, for instance, Louise (Susan Sarandon) confronts a man who has just sexually assaulted her friend Thelma (Gina Davis) in a parking lot. The man laughs at Louise's feeble attempts to intervene.

So she pulls out a gun and shoots him dead. Says a flabbergasted Thelma: "I bet he didn't expect *that*."

I know how he feels. There I was minding my own business – or, rather, France's – when the fury of Gallic public opinion hit me in the sternum like Louise's unexpected

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bullet. I should have seen it coming. I should have realized that an American cannot make unwanted advances on the power and glory of French culture without provoking a sharp and unpleasant response. I would have been wise to confine my thoughts on the subject to Paris dinner parties and e-mails to friends back home, rather than publishing an article entitled “The Death of French Culture” in an American magazine. But I was under the delusion that my remarks would be perceived by French readers much as I perceived them: as friendly, positive observations about a country I rather like.

How naïve, how obtuse, how American. Didn’t I know that culture is the sacred *vache* of French public life, the soft and easily irritated underbelly of national self-regard? You can criticize France’s work ethic, its smoking habits, its tax régime. But whatever you do, don’t say anything bad about its culture. And do not for a moment think that your observations will be taken lightly, your criticisms considered constructive. Don’t expect people to understand that you were just trying to help. When a foreigner tries to help by pointing out certain, ahem . . . shortcomings in the realm of French culture, his good deed does not go unpunished.

My punishment was swift and public. Within days after my 3,000-word article on the decline of France as an international cultural power appeared in *Time* magazine’s December 3, 2007, European edition, the French media lit up like the Eiffel Tower in full sparkle.¹ Nearly every major daily newspaper, broadcast channel, and serious website in the country carried a report on my impertinence. Government officials, cultural mandarins, and the media outlets’ own culture reporters were trotted out to refute my assertions. A typical response, by *Le Nouvel Observateur* literary columnist Didier Jacob: “For Americans, French culture is simultaneously an object of derision and desire. If there were an algebraic formula to sum up its quintessence, it would go a little like this: De Gaulle + Sartre + the baguette + Sophie Marceau’s breasts = French culture.” Jacob’s observation, posted on the magazine’s website, prompted dozens of

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responses. Many were of this sort: “I don’t know the author of this article, but he can’t possibly be serious.”

“The U.S. counts among its populace many researchers, scholars, thinkers and innovators of the highest level. Only, they don’t write for *Time*,” sneered Maurice Druon, the grand old man of French letters, in *Le Figaro*. He accused me of having confused, “like the majority of his public, culture and entertainment.” (Where he found time to interview all of my public, I know not.) Druon’s polemic was accompanied by no fewer than five articles in a valiantly jingoistic attempt by *Le Figaro* to eviscerate my opus. The newspaper dispatched its correspondents in the U.S. to find evidence that French culture was thriving there, though they did not detect much activity outside New York City. Other *Le Figaro* journalists reported that French painters were doing well in London, that French philosophers were held in high respect around the world (though, for some reason, not French novelists), that French architects were thriving and that French films were popular everywhere except, um . . . outside France. *Le Figaro*’s campaign – spread over three pages, with nice photos of the French techno-pop group Daft Punk in funny hats and of Bartabas, creator of the “equestrian theater” Zingaro, posing with one of his horses – seemed like overkill. Was *Le Figaro* subliminally acknowledging that I had hit a sensitive nerve?

Still in *Le Figaro*, art dealer Anne Faggionato noted that my article contained lots of facts and complained that “All these pseudo-analyses in the American style try to legitimize themselves by citing numbers. But art can’t be measured that way, its econometrics are absurd, and the future will prove its worth.” In *Libération*, Teresa Cremisi, chief executive of the Flammarion publishing house, deplored my “mercantilist” view in which culture is seen solely in terms of immediate returns. A few French came to my defense, most admirably the hot young novelist David Foenkinos, who told *Le Nouvel Observateur*: “Fundamentally, Morrison isn’t wrong. I believe the cultural power of France is in decline, that’s

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evident to me. History is full of periods, hegemonies and round-trips.”

The blogosphere went into overdrive, as websites from Bibliobs.fr to the Vietnamese-language Diendan.org saw fit to comment on the story. A posting on Superfrenchie.com received 165 responses, most of them chastising me for various errors and omissions. Even critics outside France weighed in. American author Edward Champion called me “*Time Magazine*’s cultural answer to Fox News,” a wounding insult to any serious journalist. Champion further suggested that “Morrison doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about.” With equal delicacy, a reader of British pop-culture critic Momus’ website posted this penetrating observation: “Morrison really shat the bed. Embarrassing. Fortunately, *Time* can’t even get noticed in the waiting room of the average dentist’s office these days.”

The foreign press quickly picked up on the controversy. The London *Times*’ man in Paris, Charles Bremner, asserted that I had overstated France’s failings. Britain’s *Guardian* went so far as to commission a critique from Bernard-Henri Lévy, the leading French celebrity-intellectual, who observed that my article was less about France’s decline than America’s. Declared journalist Iman Kurdi in Saudi Arabia’s *Arab News*: “I not only disagree [with Morrison] but cheer the fact that France has remained distinctly French.” I did better in the *Financial Times*, where columnist Christopher Caldwell used my assertions as a springboard for a critique of French lip service toward cultural diversity. Perhaps the most admiring of my critics was Catherine Fieschi, director of the British Council think tank Counterpoint. Writing in *Prospect* magazine, she congratulated me for having “lobbed a small hand grenade into the playground of the French intelligentsia.”

I got to confront some of that playground’s habitants directly. Two French TV programs allowed me to debate Olivier Poivre d’Arvor, the head of the Foreign Ministry-financed Culturesfrance and author of a *Le Monde* article questioning

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my conclusions. (He was thoughtful and gracious, on-air and off.) I participated in yet another TV chat with film director Constantin Costa-Gavras (*Z*, *Missing*, *State of Siege*), editor François Busnel of the book-lovers' magazine *Lire*, and cultural commentators Jérôme Bégé and Frédéric Martel. A few of these experts found things to admire in my story; all of them spotted grave deficiencies in it.

My own country's Ambassador to France, Craig Stapleton, wrote a letter to the editor of *Time* about the controversy. But instead of standing up for me, Stapleton leapt to the defense of France, which, in the America of his boss George W. Bush, was not enormously popular at the time. Wrote Stapleton: "The vitality of French culture should be measured by more than just the box-office receipts of the week." That is not quite how I measured things, but most commentators seemed not to have noticed, contenting themselves with righteous indignation at my supposed attack on the glory that was France.

I was, frankly, astonished at the size and passion of the response I had provoked. So were some of my detractors. Wrote author and critic Pierre Assouline: "How an article like this can inspire such an outburst of anger in the French media, and provoke such fistfights in the blogosphere, is a mystery I cannot explain." John Brenkman, a professor at New York City's Baruch College, wondered whether the French were taking the whole thing a bit too seriously. My story, he wrote in *Le Monde*,

has had, in France, the same result as Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which announced to America, in realistic and convincing tones, that Martians had invaded. Today, it's the French who have persuaded themselves of an American attack on French culture. . . Put another way, the *Time* article is nothing but a hoax, and the public, egged on by the French media, is the victim. "A sucker is born every day," said P. T. Barnum, the grand man of show business . . . In this case, the sucker – pardon me – is France. You, my French friends, have swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

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Amid all the fuss, I flew to New York City for a few days of quiet. The debate raged on without me. My New York trip was interrupted by the BBC, which tracked me down at a Manhattan restaurant. Over the din of clattering dishes and shouting waiters, I went on the air in a live radio debate with the *Independent's* veteran Paris correspondent, John Lichfield. I couldn't hear very well, so he did most of the talking.

The problem, it seemed, was not so much my article as the cover of the issue in which it appeared. That featured a rather appealing portrait by London-based photographer Pål C. Hansen of the great French mime Marcel Marceau, staring with wistful sadness, as mimes do, at a flower the very same shade as *Time's* trademark red border. The image was a brilliant choice: Marceau had died a few months earlier, and with him a piece of France's heart – thus underlining the note of loss and poignancy that I had tried to attain in my story. (I was not alone in this view. Olivier Poivre d'Arvor also found Marceau a fitting cover subject: "It is true that over the past few years, for those who do not speak the language, it has been the silent artists of French culture who have hit your headlines: the mime artist Marceau, the silent abysses of Commandant [Jacques] Cousteau, our choreographers, our circus acts . . . We resist, with all our powers, our sublime speechlessness, our faltering discomfort, the uproar and hubbub of the world, but we would still like to impress you, just a little, modestly, in the French style."² Poivre d'Arvor, the brother of famed TV presenter Patrick Poivre d'Arvor and the man in charge of promoting French culture abroad, wrote this in a "letter to our American friends" published in *Le Monde*.

In any case, it is a beautiful photograph, clean and simple, classical in composition – and with that vivid red flower to catch the eye. A bit of a cliché, I must admit. Just as the French press has a weakness for depicting Americans in cowboy hats and Englishmen in bowlers, U.S. publications love to put the French in bérêts and striped boating shirts. But as a cover image, it certainly jumped off the newsstand.

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So, unhappily for me, did the article's headline: "The Death of French Culture." The subhead was equally inflammatory: "Quick, name a living artist or writer from France who has global significance. Right. But help is on the way." I did not write any of those words. On French TV, I joked that, like many American companies, *Time* now outsourced the writing of its cover lines to a call center in India. (No one laughed.) In fact, the words were penned at the magazine's European headquarters in London. I did not see them or the cover image until after they were printed. Frankly, I was rather shocked. My article was not about "death," but rather about decline and redemption. Still unaware of the cover and its headline, I gave an interview to *Libération*. My interviewer, Edouard Launet, had the delicacy not to mention them, but I came away from our chat with an uneasy feeling – justified, as it turned out. In his article, Launet asks peevishly: "What bug bit Don Morrison to make him tear French culture to pieces?"

Me, a shredder of culture, a merchant of pique? I am innocent, I thought. But then I thought again. Having been an editor myself for more than three decades, I have written my share of provocative headlines. I realize that it is sometimes necessary to use inflammatory language on a magazine cover in order to seize the public's attention. Of course it is an exaggeration to say that French culture is dead. But it is a modest and perhaps necessary overstatement if one's task is to grab readers by the lapels. If the hyperbolic language on the cover led the French to wonder why they no longer dominate the cultural landscape, to re-examine the efficacy of their many cultural subsidies and quotas, and to better integrate France's long-excluded minorities into the cultural scene, then so much the better.

And that, in fact, is pretty much what happened. The French cultural establishment spent the next two years not just denouncing me and *Time*, but also re-examining the role of culture in national life. Seemingly endless hours were expended in debates on TV and radio, and hectares of newsprint were lavished on commentaries and responses.

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Sometimes I was mentioned, often not. The story just wouldn't go away. I hardly expected to be made a Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters, but I was gratified by the seriousness with which the French took my musings.

This seriousness was confirmed by Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, who thanked me for "this magnificent cover of *Time*." It presented, he said, a welcome opportunity to reflect on the value of France's cultural assets. He wrote, in an article I arranged to have published in *Time*: "Admittedly, *Time's* gift was unexpected. Giving such prominence to French culture in its readers' minds rather than issues of worldwide interest. Our fifteen minutes of fame! The chance to remind our fellow countrymen that nothing can be taken for granted, that it is necessary to fight, including at home, to reaffirm the importance of this culture, the power of our influence. A way of reawakening the interest of the political community, the media, the culture professionals and the general public in this exceptional topic . . ." You're welcome, Olivier.

As the reactions poured in, I began to have regrets. My article was too short to explore such a complex subject in sufficient detail. Too much good material had been left on the cutting-room floor. Important points had gone unaddressed, trenchant arguments unmade. The time allotted to me for research, interviews, and reflection had been inadequate. The writing could have been more felicitous. The usual author's regrets.

So I leapt at a French publisher's offer to dilate on the subject at book length. As before, I did not wish to join the crowded field of France-in-decline books, but merely to continue the vigorous debate that the article had inspired and, possibly, to illuminate a path to understanding and renewal. As with my magazine article, this new, expanded version was met with a similar chorus of shock and refutation when it was published in France in late 2008. Another round of TV and newspaper interviews ensued, including a full-page Q.-and-A. in *Le Monde*, a profile as "Person of the Day" in *Libération*, and an invitation to appear on French radio's equivalent of "Desert Island Discs." This time around,

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however, I had company. To my delight, the eminent scholar Antoine Compagnon had generously agreed to write a response, which is included in this volume. I was, and remain, honored to be in his company.

I am also grateful to the scholars, writers, artists, colleagues, friends, and other *amateurs* of French culture who shared their wisdom and eased my task in many ways. Prominent among them are Frédéric Martel, Guy Walter, Douglas Kennedy, François Busnel, Christophe Boïcos, Marc Lévy, and Georgina Oliver; my *Time* colleagues Claire Senard, Peter Gumbel and Grant Rosenberg (who helped with the reporting); Michael Elliott, William Green, and James Graff (the *Time* trio who commissioned and edited the original article); Yves and Florence Darbois, Jonathan and Renée Fenby, David and Rebecca Tepfer, and Joseph and Sigun Coyle, my advisers on things French; John Morris and Philippe Salomon, who informed the chapter on photography; my regular dinner-discussion companions Charles DeGroot, Jake Lamar, John Baxter, Wolfgang Kuhlmeier, Amir Al-Anbari, John Lvoff and Barry Lando; and, of course, Ann Morrison, who inspires every word I write and edits most of them. None of these generous souls bears any responsibility for the lapses of fact and judgment herein. If this edition incites new waves of anger and derision, I must face them alone.

II.

So what did I write in *Time* that prompted such an outpouring of bile, defensiveness, and, among a few kind readers, grudging thanks?

I began by mentioning the 2007 cultural *rentrée*, the annual rush-to-market of literary and artistic products carefully timed to follow France's brain-dead summer vacation season and to precede the late-fall flurry of cultural awards. That year's harvest was especially bountiful: 727 new novels, up from 683 the previous year; hundreds of new music albums

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and dozens of new films; blockbuster art exhibitions at all the big museums; fresh programs of concerts, operas, and plays in the elegant *salles* that grace French cities. Autumn means many things in many countries, but in France it signals the dawn of a new cultural year.

And nobody, I said, takes culture more seriously than the French. They subsidize it generously; they cosset it with quotas and tax breaks. French media give it vast amounts of airtime and column inches. Every French town of any size has its annual opera or theater festival, its Maison de la Culture and, in its churches, weekend organ and chamber-music recitals.

There is one problem. All of these mighty oaks being felled in France's cultural forest make barely a sound in the wider world. Once admired for the dominating excellence of its writers, artists, and musicians, France today is a wilting power in the global cultural marketplace. That is an especially sensitive issue right now, as a forceful President sets out to restore French standing in the world. When it comes to culture, Nicolas Sarkozy has his work cut out for him.

Only a handful of the season's new novels will find a publisher outside France – and hardly any in the U.S. or the U.K., though much of the fiction sold in France is translated from the English. Earlier generations of French writers – from Molière, Balzac, Hugo, and Flaubert to Proust, Malraux, Sartre, and Camus – did not lack for audiences abroad. France's movie industry, the world's largest a century ago, has yet to recapture its New Wave eminence of the 1960s, when directors like Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut were rewriting cinematic rules. French films today tend to be amiable, low-budget trifles for the domestic market. American movies account for nearly half the tickets sold in French cinemas.

Paris, birthplace of Impressionism, Surrealism, and the other major -isms of modern art, has been supplanted by New York City, London, Berlin, and, increasingly, Beijing. French auction houses, which once dominated the public sales of contemporary art, today account for only a small

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fraction of this market. French contemporary artists receive less exposure at major museums and art exhibitions than their counterparts in the U.S., the U.K., and Germany.

France does have musicians of international repute, but no equivalents of such twentieth-century composing giants as Debussy, Satie, Ravel, and Poulenc. In popular music, French *chanteurs* and *chanteuses* such as Charles Trenet, Édith Piaf, and Charles Aznavour were once heard the world over. Today, Americans and Britons dominate the pop scene. Few French performers are famous outside their country. An exception is perhaps Carla Bruni, who achieved a measure of success abroad for her intimate, whispery singing style but is now better known for being Mrs. Nicolas Sarkozy.

France's diminished cultural profile would be just another interesting national crotchet – like Italy's low birthrate, or Belgium's split-personality politics – if France weren't France. This is a country where promoting cultural influence has been national policy for centuries, where controversial philosophers and showy museums are symbols of pride and patriotism. Though France may no longer be an economic power, a French diplomat told the *International Herald Tribune*, it remains a player on the global stage. "If Germany has Siemens," he said, "we have Voltaire."

Moreover, France has led the charge at international trade talks for an *exception culturelle* that empowers governments to keep foreign entertainment products out while subsidizing their own. French officials, who believe such protectionism is essential for saving cultural diversity from the Hollywood juggernaut, once condemned *Jurassic Park* as a "threat to French identity."

In addition, France has long assigned itself a *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) to improve allies and colonies alike. In 2005, legislators even ordered high schools to teach "the positive role" of French colonialism. (The law was rescinded after educators and scholars howled.) France spends more of its gross domestic product on culture and recreation than any industrialized country. The Culture Ministry lavishes money not only on such high-culture

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mainstays as museums, opera houses, and theater festivals but also on popular culture forms such as folk dancing and pop music. Likewise, parliament in 2005 voted to designate *foie gras* as a protection-worthy part of the nation's cultural heritage. Like a certain other nation whose founding principles sprang from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, France is not shy about its values. As Sarkozy observed in 2007, "In the United States and France, we think our ideas are destined to illuminate the world."

Yet France does not get much payoff overseas for all that money and effort. I will present specific examples later, but here is one telling measure of France's foreign cultural reputation: In a 2007 poll of 1,310 Americans for *Le Figaro* magazine, only 20 percent considered culture to be a domain in which France excels, far behind cuisine.

My article went on to discuss various reasons for the decline: the growing dominance of the English language, faults in the French education system, the suffocating role of government in French cultural life. I also outlined various ways to reverse the decline, especially by tapping the creative energy on the margins of French society. In the end, I concluded that French culture is alive and well, though insufficiently marketed and appreciated abroad, and that France is eminently capable of regaining its position as a major cultural force.

Looking back, I see several points I should have added to the article – the overseas success of some French architects and music groups, for instance. I would also have included a proviso that box office success is not the same as artistic quality, as if anyone really confuses the two. On the other hand, I would have emphasized that it is difficult to measure the influence of French culture abroad without looking at its weight in the global marketplace. Also, I would have made it clear I was not advocating the complete abolition of cultural subsidies, merely a bit less government intrusiveness in the cultural sphere.

Critics were quick to seize on such lapses, but a few respondents offered thoughtful rebuttals that went beyond

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mere attacks – and kept me up at night pondering rebuttals. Culture Minister Christine Albanel, interviewed in *Libération*, took issue with my assertion that, as she paraphrased it, “excessive cultural subsidies suffocate creativity.” On the contrary, she wrote, “state support for culture is a great French tradition, which responds to changing conditions: the publishing industry was saved by the law against book discounting, and our cultural policy in the realm of cinema has prevented French films from being annihilated in the marketplace by their American counterparts.” Unless, Madame Minister, such policies discourage French producers from making the kind of books and films the world really wants.

Didier Jacob on his blog said that the *Time* article “refers to a conception of culture that is today largely out of date.” There are no more Molières or Prousts in France, he explained, just as there are no more Henry Jameses in the U.S. Yes, dear Didier, but there are Philip Roth, Cormac McCarthys, Don DeLillos, Thomas Pynchons, Joan Didions and until their recent deaths, world-beating talents like John Updike, Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer. Besides, James could be a colossal bore. Moreover, Jacob said, throughout the world “the very idea of a literary masterpiece disappeared during the second half of the twentieth century.” Don’t tell that to Jonathan Lethem, Edwige Danticat, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer, Richard Powers, Marilynne Robinson, Jonathan Franzen, Amy Tan, and hundreds of other very serious U.S. writers. The purported death of the masterpiece has not stopped them from constant attempts to write the big book, the major literary statement, the Great American Novel.

Perhaps the most elaborate response came from Olivier Poivre d’Arvor with his “Letter to Our American Friends.” After *Time* published it, his Culturesfrance expanded the missive into a booklet distributed around the world. That version also included a list of 300 “creators, French or working in France, who are famous in a minimum of 20 foreign countries each.” The list was compiled by “consulting Culturesfrance associates in close to 80 countries.” A wise