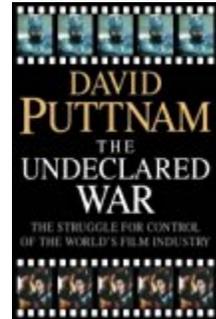


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Puttnam. *The Undeclared War: The Struggle for Control of the World's Film Industry*. London: HarperCollins, 1997. xii + 413 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-00-255675-0.

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In the early 1990's, during the GATT talks, Europe and America clashed irreconcilably over film production and distribution. Americans—represented by Jack Valenti—insisted on the inclusion of cinema in the provisions for unrestricted market access; Europeans feared that once granted such inclusion would mean an end to their own film industries, so they fought and kept the restrictions in place. The current cease-fire, however, is only temporary, and fighting is expected to erupt once again in just a few years.

This is why after the 1990's GATT talks, the European Commission appointed a think-tank headed by producer David Puttnam, mandated to help European film industries find a path to a creatively and commercially vigorous future without resorting to the damaging and negative policies they have implemented in the past. His book is based on a series of Berlin and Oxford University lectures in 1994/5 and contains an account of an extensive background to support his involvement in the battle for European cinema's survival.

Far from engaging in simplistic answers, Puttnam declares that it is necessary to take a fresh look at the entire century of the film medium in order to get insights for what is in store for cinema industries. Thus the main body of Puttnam's analysis of the "undeclared war" is taken by a historical overview of the development of cinema on both sides of the Atlantic. He starts with Edison and the Lumiere brothers to come to present-day issues about blockbuster distribution tactics and art house cinema circuits. While in 1908 foreign imports accounted 70% of the total number of films released in America, by 1909 as a result of the activities of the MPPC cartel the European share had been halved, and this is the turning point for American dominance from which the Eu-

ropeans would never really recover.

Many major American film industry figures in Puttnam's account—from early American producers and their European counterparts, to present day figures. The experiences of European directors who have worked for the Americans are also discussed. Alongside the much better known story of Hollywood, Puttnam paints an extensive picture of the European experience. One of the main lines in Puttnam's historical excursion is the comparison of approaches: the American one deeply rooted in business and turning cinema into entertainment industry, and the European one deeply rooted in enlightenment and claiming cinema as an art form. Problems in regard to political propaganda and legislation shifts, mechanisms and impediments of international distribution, regulation on production and exhibition are all considered by Puttnam in his extensive exploration of facts. Of particular interest are his critical comments on the situation in present day European filmmaking, and on the shortcomings of the administrative mechanisms which Europe has devised to fight in the battle which it anticipates.

In one of the most interesting parts of the book, Puttnam discusses his personal relationship with American cinema—starting with his childhood fascination with it and describing his first visit to America in 1963 as some sort of "going home," up to his short-lived executive involvement with Coca Cola-owned Columbia pictures in 1987—a sincere account containing insightful analysis of his mistakes and misunderstandings, thus supplying the historical investigation of the book with a unique personal touch.

The book is a valuable document, a rare case of a producer's take on the processes in the world of film at large.

Several critical points need to be made about Puttnam's vision of the struggle for control of the world's cinema industry:

First, I am not fully convinced of each and every piece in Puttnam's supporting evidence and the interpretation he gives it can be deemed directly relevant to the current state of things. It is difficult to convince me that today's struggle for domination is a direct continuation of the past clashes: a claim does not bring into consideration the whole complexity of background factors and forces that played roles in earlier years. Realizing that simply claiming today's situation is just a straightforward continuation of past tensions would be unsustainable, Puttnam refrains from making such a general statement. But as he does not bring together all the pieces that he spreads over 350 pages, the reader is left facing the task alone.

Second, in his discussion of European processes and for the purposes of juxtaposing them to the American ones, Puttnam seems to take off from a presumption that some sort of European unity existed throughout all the one hundred years that he discusses—a premise which would be difficult to sustain.

Third, the juxtapositions between the commercial/entertainment versus public service/art philosophies of cinema which allegedly dwell in America and Europe

respectively, are interesting. It proves impossible for Puttnam, however, to systematically follow through with a clear-cut distinction. The truth is that elements of each one can be found on both sides of the Atlantic.

Finally, the author mentions in passing early Soviet cinema, Hong Kong film industry, and Hollywood, but his focus is exclusively on the West. At the same time, he claims to talk about "the world," a usage which I find deeply problematic in our age of globalization.

Puttnam's book should be regarded as a statement on political philosophy, like the ones that government leaders put out from time to time. Based on series of lectures, the text is only seemingly geared toward an audience of academics or students. Its actual purpose is to serve as background to a forthcoming blueprint for the next round of the "undeclared war" over cinema's future.

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