

The Library
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French: *The Death of French Culture*

French

The Death of French Culture, 2010
Donald Morrison & Antoine Compagnon
Polity Press

English version

First published in French under the title *Que reste-t-il de la culture française?*, this book outlines the sad decline of the influence of French culture throughout the world. Once the pre-eminent culture of the world, French culture lags far behind that of the United States, Britain, and Germany in terms of exportation of cultural products. According to Compagnon, *the influence of French culture abroad is now consistent with the geopolitical heft of France in the world, and with its foreign trade. Indeed, culture contributes to the deficit in our trade balance since, in a historic reversal of trends, we import many more cultural products than we export.* (p. 103)

Morrison's thesis infuriated the French for whom any attack on its culture is considered an attack on the soul and on the national pride of France. He states that *(y)ou can criticize France's work ethic, its smoking habits, its tax regime. But whatever you do, don't say anything bad about its culture.* (p. 2) The culture referred to in this book *is not so much about customs and beliefs systems as about art, literature, music, and other forms of expression of the high culture sort.* (p. 18) He decries the lack of modern day Molières, Voltaires, Hugos, Monets, Ravels, Piafs, etc. Most French culture being celebrated today is that of the past.

In spite of the fact that *(t)his is a country where promoting cultural influence has been a national policy for centuries...France spends more of its gross domestic product on culture and recreation than any industrialized country* (p.11) the reality remains that most cultural products, i.e., literature, music, art, cinema, theater, photography, architecture, never leave the confines of the Hexagone.

According to Compagnon, *out of the 700 to 800 new French novels on sale in the bookshops every autumn, at the start of each new literary season, fewer than a dozen will be translated in the United States, most of them by university presses that have no commercial gain* (p. 100) In the realm of cinema, *(a)ccording to the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), U.S. films accounted for 44.5 percent of the tickets sold in France in 2008, almost as many as French movies did (45.7 percent)* (p. 35) and very few of those French films ever saw the light of day on screens abroad.

The book discusses the following reasons for the decline of French culture throughout the world: *the growing dominance of the English language, faults in the French education system, and the suffocating role of government in French cultural life.* (p. 12) According to the author, although

the French realize that their language is in decline as a global language of commerce and diplomacy, they still *cling to the illusion that it retains its importance as a transmitter of culture*. (p. 59) Consequently, the natural audience for French cultural products tends to be local rather than universal because modern French novels, films, songs, and plays are not being translated for the non-French speaking world. English language cultural products are not only outpacing those of the French outside of France, but they also provide stiff competition within the borders of France itself. Consider the following:

1. *The British Council found a decade ago that 27 percent of the world's books are published in English (compared to 12 percent in German and 8 percent in French)*. (pp. 59-60)
2. *A survey by the French magazine Livres Hebdo found that 13 of Europe's 40 best-selling novels of 2008-09 were originally written in English (versus 5 in French)*. (p. 27)
3. *Aside from the classics, which have long been performed in translation, French theatre is rarely seen abroad*. (p. 41)
4. *...according to Variety, French films were seen by 57 million people outside France, down 9 percent from the year before and 32 percent from 2005*. (p. 36)
5. *In general, French movies do not fare particularly well abroad. Only about one in five gets exported to the U.S.* (p. 36)
6. *Sometimes it seems that half the novels published in France are mostly about their authors. ... Perhaps that is why so few French novels interest anyone outside France, especially in the English-speaking world*. (p. 31)
7. *...four of the 15 top-selling 2007 albums in France were by Anglo-Saxon artists and a fifth by a German band...In the second week of February 2009, half of the 10 top albums were foreign imports (mostly from the U.S.), as well as 9 of the top 10 singles. Not one French title or artist appeared on comparable lists in the U.S. and the U.K. Nor was there a single French entry on combined lists of best-selling albums and singles in the world*. (p. 55)

Morrison deploras the state of the French educational system which as of 1968 has *crowded the arts out of the secondary-school curriculum. The literature baccalaureate program, once the most popular, is now far outstripped by the science and the economics options. About half of all students took the Bac L in 1968, but by 2007 the figure was down to 18.6 percent* (p. 61) In his opinion, the rigor of the system has been replaced *by an emphasis on personal development at the expense of actual knowledge*. (p. 61)

Morrison further asserts that the French Ministry of Culture with its enormous bureaucracy stifles creativity and promotes mediocrity and complacency among authors, artists, musicians, and performers because they must conform their production to cultural standards that are determined by a bevy of bureaucrats who in essence decide what culture is by granting subsidies to those who satisfy their criteria. The whole system has been labeled a "cultural welfare state" by various critics.

The author believes that the situation can be turned around if culture is defined by those who produce it, if French cultural policy focused on *raising French culture's profile abroad while reducing the government's role in determining what gets produced in France* (p. 73), and if

the bureaucrats *stop imposing their own vision of culture on the nation and start applauding the ferment on the fringes* (p. 82) i.e., they need to recognize those francophone authors who come from the vast French-speaking world and include them within the French cultural circle.

According to Compagnon, France has lost its cultural leadership because *France no longer knows how to promote its language and culture in the world.* (p. 121) He strongly believes that the future of French culture lies in the long-term support of the government *given to the teaching of French in high schools or even at the primary level,* (pp. 114-115) which is much more important although less immediately gratifying than organizing and publicizing a dance festival somewhere in a foreign country.

Recommended by Marcel LaVergne, French Language Book Review Editor

Version française

Ce livre qui parut en France sous le titre *Que reste-t-il de la culture française?* décrit le triste déclin de la culture française à travers le monde. Cette culture, une fois la culture primordiale du monde a été supplantée par celles des Etats-Unis, de la Grande-Bretagne et de l'Allemagne quant à l'exportation de leurs produits culturels. D'après Compagnon *the influence of French culture abroad is now consistent with the geopolitical heft of France in the world, and with its foreign trade. Indeed, culture contributes to the deficit in our trade balance since, in a historic reversal of trends, we import many more cultural products than we export.* (p. 103)

La thèse de Morrison a enragé les Français pour qui l'attaque sur leur culture équivaut à une attaque contre leur âme et contre leur fierté nationale. Il écrit que *(y)ou can criticize France's work ethic, its smoking habits, its tax regime. But whatever you do, don't say anything bad about its culture.* (p. 2) La culture dont il parle dans ce livre *is not so much about customs and beliefs systems as about art, literature, music, and other forms of expression of the high culture sort.* (p. 18) Il se plaint du fait qu'il n'y a pas aujourd'hui de Molière, de Voltaire, de Hugo, de Monet, de Ravel, de Piaf, etc. La culture qu'on célèbre aujourd'hui reste toujours celle du passé.

Malgré le fait que *(t)his is a country where promoting cultural influence has been a national policy for centuries...France spends more of its gross domestic product on culture and recreation than any industrialized country* (p.11) il est toujours vrai que la plupart des produits culturels français i.e., la littérature, la musique, le cinéma, le théâtre, la photographie, l'architecture, ne traversent que rarement les frontières de l'Hexagone.

Selon Compagnon, *out of the 700 to 800 new French novels on sale in the bookshops every autumn, at the start of each new literary season, fewer than a dozen will be translated in the United States, most of them by university presses that have no commercial gain.* (p. 100) Dans le domaine du cinéma, *(a)ccording to the Centre National de la Cinématographie (CNC), U.S. films accounted for 44.5 percent of the tickets sold in France in 2008, almost as*

many as French movies did (45.7 percent) (p. 35) et très peu de ces films français apparaissent sur des écrans étrangers.

Et qu'est-ce qui a causé ce déclin de la culture française dans le monde? D'après Morrison c'est *the growing dominance of the English language, faults in the French education system, and the suffocating role of government in French cultural life.* (p. 12) Il nous dit que quoique les Français sachent très bien que la présence de leur langue dans le monde du commerce et de la diplomatie a perdu beaucoup de son importance, ils *cling to the illusion that it retains its importance as a transmitter of culture.* (p. 59) Par conséquent, l'attrait naturel pour les produits français est local plutôt qu'universel parce que très peu des romans, des films, des chansons, et des pièces de théâtre d'aujourd'hui sont traduits pour le monde non-francophone. Les produits culturels en anglais dépassent ceux en français non seulement en dehors de la France mais ils leur font concurrence même en dedans de la France. Considérons les suivants:

1. *The British Council found a decade ago that 27 percent of the world's books are published in English (compared to 12 percent in German and 8 percent in French).* (pp. 59-60)
2. *A survey by the French magazine Livres Hebdo found that 13 of Europe's 40 best-selling novels of 2008-09 were originally written in English (versus 5 in French).* (p. 27)
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Morrison déplore l'état actuel du système français d'éducation qui dès 1968 *crowded the arts out of the secondary-school curriculum. The literature baccalaureate program, once the most popular, is now far outstripped by the science and the economics options. About half of all students took the Bac L in 1968, but by 2007 the figure was down to 18.6 percent* (p. 61) Selon lui, la rigueur du système a été remplacée *by an emphasis on personal development at the expense of actual knowledge.* (p. 61)

Il insiste davantage que la vaste bureaucratie du Ministère Français de la Culture étouffe l'élan de la créativité et encourage la médiocrité et la complaisance parmi le rang des auteurs, des artistes, des musiciens, et des comédiens parce qu'ils doivent conformer leurs

productions aux standards culturels déterminés par le vaste ensemble de bureaucrates qui décident ce qu'est la culture en subventionnant ceux qui satisfont à leurs critères. Plusieurs critiques ont accusé ce système d'être un "cultural welfare state."

Morrison croit que l'on peut sauver ce système seulement si la culture est définie par ceux qui la produisent, si la politique culturelle française concentre sur *raising French culture's profile abroad while reducing the government's role in determining what gets produced in France* (p. 73), et si les bureaucrates *stop imposing their own vision of culture on the nation and start applauding the ferment on the fringes* (p. 82) i.e., ils doivent reconnaître ces auteurs francophones qui viennent de la Francophonie, i.e., hors de l'Hexagone, et les inclure dans le cercle culturel français.

Selon Compagnon, la France a perdu sa dominance culturelle parce que *France no longer knows how to promote its language and culture in the world.* (p. 121) Il croit fortement que l'avenir de la culture française réside dans le support du gouvernement *given to the teaching of French in high schools or even at the primary level,* (pp. 114-115) ce qui est bien plus important quoique moins immédiatement gratifiant que le fait d'organiser et de faire de la publicité d'un festival de danse dans un pays étranger quelconque.

Recommandé par Marcel LaVergne, éditeur, revue de livres français