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### Americans are seeing fewer and fewer foreign films



By Carrie Rickey  
Inquirer Film Critic

Once upon a time, when foreign-language films dominated art houses like Philadelphia's Ritz Five, in a given week moviegoers could sample French, Italian, or Chinese fare as easily as they could at local eateries.



Hiam Abbass (left) and Nisreen Faour in "Amreeka," in which a sympathetic Palestinian woman from the West Bank tries to make a life for herself in the American Midwest. The movie challenges cultural stereotypes.

Consider the last days in December 2000, when *La Bûche* played the Roxy, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* drew crowds at the Ritz East, and *Malena* - an Italian film featuring Monica Bellucci - was at the Ritz Five.

When *Crouching Tiger* went on to become the most successful foreign-language film ever in the United States, earning \$128 million, industry pundits predicted the box office for subtitled films was rising.

Instead, it plunged.

The presence of foreign films in America is on the wane. By The Inquirer's count, from 2004 to 2009, the proportion of foreign films shown in the Philadelphia area dropped dramatically, from 20 percent to 12 percent, mirroring a long-term national trend.

"In the 1960s, imports accounted for 10 percent of the U.S. film box office," says Toby Miller, coauthor of *Global Hollywood*. "In 1986, that figure was 7 percent. Today, it is 0.75 percent."

Foreign-language films represent less than 1 percent of the domestic box office "at a time when Hollywood movies account for 63 percent of the global box office," says Len Klady, box-office analyst for moviecitynews.com and Screen International.

While a trade imbalance may be great for the American film business, it creates a lopsided cultural exchange in which the world learns about America while America isn't learning about the world. Observers suggest that the imbalance is caused by a variety of factors, including parochialism, diminishing box-office revenues, the supposed inferior quality of foreign-language films, and the dreaded subtitle.

As culture and politics are more globalized than ever, the isolationism of American film audiences presents real perils, says Larry Gross, a professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School.

"American films reinforce a worldview in which we are always the center of attention and the heroes of the story," Gross says. "It's difficult to imagine that an Iraqi filmmaker would create a film such as *The Hurt Locker* to represent the war we imposed on his or her country."

Foreign-language films often show America how the world sees us, says Annette Insdorf, director of film studies at Columbia University.

"In the context of American antiterrorism, Arabs are often stereotyped onscreen as villains, much like Native Americans were in westerns of the 1930s and '40s," Insdorf says. "But foreign films like *Amreeka* - in which a sympathetic Palestinian woman from the West Bank tries to make a life for herself in the American Midwest - challenge those stereotypes."

Foreign films also challenge the Hollywood recipe, says Marianne Bernstein, a photographer and gallery curator in Society Hill. Bernstein used to go to the Ritz once a week to satisfy her foreign-film cravings but lately, with fewer foreign films out there, it's more like once a month.

"What I get from foreign films that I don't get from Hollywood is subtlety and nuance, that gray area - which is life," she said. "I'm not interested in the comfort food of American movies with their clear-cut heroes and villains."

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Bob Vitalis, a political science professor at the University of Pennsylvania, sees how films he shows in his course, Politics of the Middle East, affect his students, some of whom are U.S. military officers getting degrees before returning to Iraq.

When Vitalis screens Egypt's *On Boys, Girls and the Veil*, a 1995 film in which Cairo youths discuss love, sex, and marriage in an era of contracting economic opportunity, "kids in the class identify immediately with those in the film," he says. The soldiers "are surprised to encounter a movie about the Middle East that they can see in terms of their own lives rather than through a prism of ethnic and sectarian conflict."

Not everyone wrings his hands at the diminishing presence of foreign-language films in U.S. theaters.

"With more and more Americans traveling abroad, and access to a very wide range of foreign publications available on the Internet, it's hard to say that Americans aren't learning about other countries," says Michael Mandelbaum, a professor of foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University. "Maybe the foreign films just aren't very good."

While many would challenge his speculation about quality, you can't argue with the box office. Compare the \$128 million in revenue for *Crouching Tiger* with the \$6 million grossed by *Coco Before Chanel*, the United States' most commercially successful foreign-language film of 2009.

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