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Sarah Walkley. Cultural Diversity in the French Film Industry: Defending the Cultural Exception in a Digital Age. Palgrave MacMillan.

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Abstract

Review of Sarah Walkley, *Cultural Diversity in the French Film Industry: Defending the Cultural Exception in a Digital Age*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2018.

Keywords

cultural exception, cultural diversity, French film policy, trade negotiations, digital

Sarah Walkley. *Cultural Diversity in the French Film Industry: Defending the Cultural Exception in a Digital Age*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2018. 278 pp.

Since the earliest days of cinema, France has been steadfast in the promotion of French films to French consumers and increasingly protective of its audiovisual industry, especially from U.S. market dominance. In *Cultural Diversity in the French Film Industry: Defending the Cultural Exception in a Digital Age*, Sarah Walkley asks whether it can continue its policies concerning *le septième art* ‘the seventh art,’ given the dramatic shift in the media landscape in recent years. In her comprehensive investigation of cultural diversity within the French film industry, Walkley demonstrates the need for France to rethink practices that have been successful in theaters but that are not necessarily transferrable to the video-on-demand (VOD) sector. Walkley’s analysis of the cinema and VOD sectors over a twenty-year span (1996-2016) raises the bar in terms of scope and scale; her market test is the first one to analyze a period of such length and to examine the VOD sector. Her book concludes with a series of policy recommendations for the French film industry’s continued defense of cultural diversity in the digital era, as well as valuable considerations for stakeholders in ongoing international trade negotiations concerning cultural products within the audiovisual industry.

Walkley’s approach to the book’s overarching question is both qualitative and quantitative. She uses data published by the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée (CNC) ‘National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image,’ which “French politicians have steadfastly avoided in their defense of the cultural exception, giving primacy to arguments based on cultural diversity, identity and self-expression” (28). One of the strengths of her study is drawing from this data to measure diversity. While the idea of quantifying diversity may seem incongruous, Walkley explains that detailed qualitative approaches would take too long to analyze the vast number of films included in her study (listed in the Appendix). Further, she posits that hard data to reinforce French arguments for the cultural exception may carry more weight in discussions with international policy-makers. One quantitative measure in her study, however, may lend itself better to a qualitative analysis. Market disparity, or one component of diversity as defined by cultural economists François Moreau and Stéphanie Peltier—whose 2004 analysis “Cultural Diversity in the Movie Industry: A Cross-National Study” provides a model for Walkley’s—examines the levels of perceivable difference between films available to consumers. Following her method, disparity identifies factors such as a film’s nationality, director(s), and budget, but by examining characteristics such as film style and genre, a qualitative approach could more accurately discern the difference between films.

In addition to providing empirical evidence for reforming policies that uphold cultural diversity in the VOD sector, another important contribution of

Walkley's book is a more nuanced understanding of this very notion. She traces the fluidity of definition of cultural exception and cultural diversity in discussions on international trade, which have led to misunderstandings and allowed stakeholders to appropriate the term(s) in the way that best supports their interests. Walkley skillfully shows the complexity of each term and demonstrates the need for a common understanding in future discussions on international trade. Her use of cultural diversity stems from UNESCO's definition, or the "manifold ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression" and is "made manifest when there is a broad range of cultural expressions both supplied and consumed" (11-12). France tends to focus on the supply side, whereas the U.S. is typically more concerned with demand, a key disagreement surrounding France's opposition to liberalize trade of cultural products. Walkley's discussion clarifies France and the U.S.'s positions in the past and can serve to inform policy-makers on all sides regarding the rules governing the circulation of cultural products.

Walkley structures her approach to France's promotion of cultural diversity in three strands—national identity, cultural diversity, and digital disruption—and draws on first-hand interviews with filmmakers, policy-makers, and trade specialists from France and the U.S. Chapter 2 explores the French's motivations for lobbying so fervently for their film industry and links their perceptions of national identity to their uneasy relationship with globalization. Understanding their motivations allows for a better grasp of the strategies they deploy to defend cultural diversity. In chapter 3, she traces French efforts to protect and support the film industry through the implementation of quotas and subsidies, built upon the principle that "those who profit from creative works and use them to further their own development should contribute . . . to financing those works" (66). While production in France is more vibrant than in other European nations, she also notes the complexity and flaws of the film industry's funding structure and that attempts to rethink the overall system may be in order with the rise of digital media.

Chapter 4 delves into France and the U.S.'s differing views on trade and culture. Fundamental ideological differences underpin their conflicting positions with respect to France's move to exempt cultural products from the rules governing international commerce. The widely indiscriminate use of the term cultural exception has left international trade negotiations stuck, and the situation has only grown more complex and pressing in the digital age. While VOD services have altered the French media landscape significantly, France's approach to policy has changed little, as chapter 5 highlights. The basic principle that those who benefit from film should contribute to its creation remains intact, but the question of how to enforce these funding commitments on new market entrants is puzzling, especially services that operate from outside French borders, as Netflix does. Chapter 6 explores how policy approaches might be modified to promote cultural diversity in the digital age, considering that a diverse film selection for consumers

does not necessarily equate to diverse consumption. To determine which policy approaches are best suited to promote cultural diversity in the VOD sector, Walkley assesses three aspects of diversity—variety, balance, and disparity—which are “individually insufficient” (12), and maximizing each dimension in relation to the other two “gives rise to optimal diversity” (198). Her quantitative assessment in chapter 7 affirms the need for France to tailor certain policies to promote diversity in the VOD sector, such as bolstering support for conversion of more French films to digital format to increase the range of films available for consumers.

While this study aims to inform cultural policy decisions in France and approaches to future rounds of trade negotiations on both sides of the Atlantic, French and European film scholars alike will find this book useful, as will those seeking a thorough view of the French film industry’s principles and practices from the beginning of cinema to the digital age.

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