

«Oppenheimer, le soft power du cinéma et la culture scientifique»

Par Aurélie Jean, Publié le 27/07/2023 - FIGAROVox/CHRONIQUE -

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Parmi les sorties cinéma de cet été, deux films se démarquent par l'attente qu'ils ont déclenché depuis des mois chez les spectateurs, mais aussi par leur qualité extraordinaire: Barbie de Greta Gerwig et Oppenheimer de Christopher Nolan. D'excellents films chacun à leur manière, ils montrent une fois de plus le pouvoir d'influence, appelé aussi soft power, des films, pour nous interroger sur notre place dans l'ordre du monde, nous faire réfléchir aux grands sujets de notre temps, ou encore nous inspirer. Le soft power du cinéma et des séries dans les domaines scientifiques en fait largement partie.

Ce terme initialement inventé pour exprimer le pouvoir politique entre les États ou au sein d'un même État, selon une méthode dite douce et subtile, le soft power s'est élargi depuis à quasiment tous les domaines. Par le cinéma et la télévision, on utilise l'image et le son pour convaincre en invoquant la raison mais aussi et surtout pour persuader en invoquant des émotions et des sentiments. Le sentiment étant la conscientisation de l'émotion qui lui correspond. Les films et les séries ont toujours été des médias d'influence tant sur les aspects culturels que politiques, au point de nommer une époque en particulier du nom d'un film ou d'une série populaire du moment. Ces mêmes films et séries ont aussi parfois transformé la société en profondeur. Véronique Chabourine qui s'intéresse de près au soft power affirme «Le soft power déconstruit les représentations sociales stéréotypées», celles sur les femmes scientifiques en font partie.

On se souvient tous du film Les figures de l'ombre (2016) qui raconte - enfin! - le travail de ces trois brillantes Afro-Américaines qui participèrent dans les années 60 aux calculs réalisés pour les programmes d'exploration spatiale de la Nasa. On pense aussi à la série Le Jeu de la dame (2020) qui suit les aventures d'une jeune fille douée au jeu d'échecs et qui inspira de nouveaux joueurs à travers le monde avec un bond de 500% en quelques semaines! Un peu plus ancien, la série X-Files (1993-2018) et en particulier le personnage du Dr. Dana Scully, inspira un grand nombre de jeunes filles à étudier les STEM après le lycée. On parle même d'effet Scully.

Plus généralement, une étude de 2017 démontre les effets des séries télévisées comme Urgences, Grey's anatomy ou encore Dr. House sur l'augmentation des inscriptions en faculté de médecine peu importe le genre des étudiants. Les mêmes constats ont été faits sur le pouvoir d'influence des séries comme Big Bang Theory qui inspira de nombreux futurs scientifiques, ingénieurs et chercheurs à comprendre notre monde au profit de l'humanité!

Oppenheimer parle de sciences et de scientifiques, de politique, de conflits, d'éthique, et d'humanité. Ce film nous interroge sur les conditions de pilotage d'un projet comme celui de Manhattan, sur les conséquences des travaux scientifiques en général, sur la considération que nous portons individuellement et collectivement envers les scientifiques, la définition même d'innovation, ou encore le rôle des dirigeants politiques dans les grands programmes nationaux. Ce film peut aussi inspirer les prochaines générations de scientifiques en physique quantique, discipline dont la part d'inconnu et d'incompréhension est encore grande comme dans la plupart des autres domaines scientifiques.

Travailler dans les sciences en pensant toujours au mal que l'on peut faire (même à une minorité) était le sujet du premier cours d'éthique que j'ai suivi en 2009, à peine arrivée à l'Université d'État de Pennsylvanie. Oppenheimer est l'incarnation de cette première leçon et plus généralement du pouvoir influençant du cinéma qui nous plonge dans le noir pour nous éclairer !

Will Tensions With China Suck the Fun Out of American Movies?

The New York Times, Sept. 4, 2023



Credit...Eva Redamonti

By Kaj Larsen

Mr. Larsen is a military technical adviser, documentary producer and stunt performer who served for 13 years as an officer in the Navy SEALs.

Two summers ago, I rode in a combat rubber raiding craft — a Zodiac — with two fellow Navy SEALs and an Air Force pararescueman. We moved quietly through the water, our M4s in hand and our objective in sight. This mission resembled my combat days — except this time, I wasn't in a war zone. I was on a film set; crouched alongside us in the Zodiac was the actor John Krasinski. The mission ended not when the enemy was down but when the director yelled, "Cut."

Since the end of my active-duty Navy service, I've performed in, executive produced and advised dozens of Hollywood depictions of military life. Congress, however, may soon complicate that work. Representative Mark Green's amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act would prohibit the Pentagon from supporting Hollywood studios — for up to 10 years — if they edit content headed to China.

Mr. Green, a Tennessee Republican, wants to push Hollywood to push back on Chinese censorship, amid controversies over the South China Sea map in "Barbie" or the Taiwanese flag in "Top Gun: Maverick," among others. Yet the Green amendment misunderstands film distribution in China, and more important, it misses the U.S. military's long and productive relationship with Hollywood.

The Pentagon regularly works with Hollywood directors, producers, writers and stunt performers, helping them bring military scenes to life. For years, the Department of Defense has aided my onscreen projects, whether documentaries on international piracy or fictionalized portrayals of combat. The Zodiac infiltration scene, for instance, was possible because a U.S. Navy destroyer had been lent to the production — precisely the kind of collaboration the Green amendment would put at risk.

Hollywood's ties to the military stretch back decades. During World War II, Hollywood created movies to aid the war effort, and entire offices of the War Department were devoted to filmmaking. Amid the country's panic after Pearl Harbor, feature films depicting American soldiers gave the nation confidence in the fight against fascism.

That cooperation continued in the postwar years. One of the best-known examples is the 1986 film "Top Gun," which had the Pentagon's blessing and benefited from military resources. For the military, "Top Gun" was a tool to boost recruitment at a crucial point in the Cold War — a mission it accomplished with aplomb. After the release of "Top Gun," the naval aviator program grew its ranks.

In fact, many soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines can point to the films and television shows that kindled their military ambitions — myself included. I was inspired to apply to the Naval Academy after seeing "Top Gun" in a movie theater; 36 years later, my life came full circle when I appeared in "Top Gun: Maverick."

That inspirational effect isn't limited to the home front. Both of the "Top Gun" films grossed roughly half their revenue abroad, meaning that these films also advanced a vision of America's military supremacy internationally. When foreign audiences see films depicting the heroism and skill of U.S. service members, it projects an uplifting idea of America's bravery and technical prowess, which aids the roughly 170,000 U.S. troops deployed to more than 100 countries around the world. Military-themed films serve U.S. foreign policy interests, reminding both allies and adversaries of our values and our might.

Such films would face a tougher road under the Green amendment. Federal officials would be forbidden to check a television or film script for classified information; documentarians could be denied access to military vessels and outposts. Even basic government services — like a producer getting access to a nonmilitary national park — might be restricted. And to what end? The Department of Defense has already instituted a rule preventing Pentagon production assistance to any project that would “advance the national interest of the People’s Republic of China.”

Mr. Green must also know that movies headed for China are released before a general audience of all ages — the equivalent of the audience for a G-rated film in America — meaning that so-called censorship is commonplace and tends to focus on foul words and steamy love scenes more than hot-button political imagery. Studios frequently do this scrubbing for other countries, too, including for audiences in India, a democratic U.S. ally.

The Green amendment, however, would single out one geopolitical adversary — China — and give Hollywood an ultimatum: Edit for China and forfeit the U.S. government’s support or reject Chinese edits, no matter how benign, and remain in the U.S. government’s good graces. But this is a false choice that would undermine America’s ability to operate in the information battle space, an arena in which, of course, China is among our primary foes.

For argument’s sake, let’s say the Green amendment does force American studios to stop editing for China and, as a result, American films are banished from Chinese theaters. How exactly does that advance Mr. Green’s crusade against China — or the cause of free speech? If Chinese audiences can no longer see American movies, the Communist censors have achieved their goal: Less Americana on their screens.

The bigger issue, from my perspective, is that the amendment could also limit Americana in America. At a time of waning patriotism and lower military recruitment, the Green amendment could leave Hollywood less capable of portraying the military accurately and arguably less willing to portray it at all. Fewer military-themed movies and shows would mean Americans would have less understanding of and appreciation for the U.S. armed forces — yet another gift to the Chinese Communist Party.

As a member of the SEALs, I fought to safeguard free speech, and I’ve buried friends who gave their lives for our freedoms — including fellow SEALs whose heroism was later portrayed by Hollywood films that depended on Pentagon support. While I share Mr. Green’s worries about Chinese censorship, I believe his amendment would be a step backward. Either Hollywood would be forced to abandon China entirely, eroding America’s cultural influence, or film studios would be forced to stop working with the Pentagon, which could undermine national security and public support for the military.

Either result would hurt America more than China — which is why the Green amendment should be rejected.

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<https://www.npr.org/2022/01/26/1075808046/china-influences-the-movies-hollywood-makes-but-it-may-not-need-the-u-s-anymore>

China influences the movies Hollywood makes. But it may not need the U.S. anymore

NPR, February 8, 2022

Over the last few decades, China has held a soft power over Hollywood. Examples range from cosmetic, like the way Chinese police heroically restore order in films like *The 355*. It can also be more overt, like China blocking the release of Chloé Zhao's film *Eternals* in the country.

Sam and author Erich Schwartzel talk about how and why China has influenced the American film industry and more reporting in his new book *Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy*.

Whatever Happened to Soft Power?

Project Syndicate, Jan 11, 2022, JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.

With the news dominated by dramatic examples of countries using coercion, intimidation, and payoffs to advance their interests, the power of attraction would seem to be irrelevant in international relations. But it still matters, and governments ignore its potential at their peril.

CAMBRIDGE – As 2021 drew to a close, Russia had massed troops near its border with Ukraine; China had flown military jets near Taiwan; North Korea was still pursuing its nuclear-weapons program; and Taliban fighters were patrolling the streets of Kabul. Seeing all this, friends asked me: “Whatever happened to soft power?”

One answer is that it can be found in other recent events, such as President Joe Biden’s virtual Summit for Democracy, which was attended by representatives from more than 100 countries. Having been excluded, China took to the airwaves and social media to proclaim that it had a different and more stable type of democracy than the one being extolled by the United States. What we were seeing was a great-power competition over soft power, understood as the ability to influence others by attraction rather than by coercion or payment.

When I first wrote about soft power in 1990, I was seeking to overcome a deficiency in how analysts thought about power generally. But the concept gradually acquired more of a political resonance. In some respects, the underlying thought is not new; similar concepts can be traced back to ancient philosophers such as Lao Tse. Nor does soft power pertain only to international behavior or to the US. Many small countries and organizations also possess the power to attract; and in democracies, at least, soft power is an essential component of leadership.

Still, the concept is now generally associated with international relations. As the European Union developed into its current form, European leaders increasingly made use of the term. And ever since 2007, when then-Chinese President Hu Jintao declared that China must develop its soft power, the government has invested billions of dollars in that quest. The challenge now is for China to implement an effective *smart-power* strategy. If it can effectively pair its growing hard power with soft power, it will be less likely to provoke counter-balancing coalitions.

Soft power is not the only or even the most important source of power, because its effects tend to be slow and indirect. But to ignore or neglect it is a serious strategic and analytic mistake. The Roman Empire’s power rested not only on its legions, but also on the attraction of Roman culture and law. Similarly, as a Norwegian analyst once described it, the American presence in Western Europe after World War II was “an empire by invitation.” No barrage of artillery brought down the Berlin Wall; it was removed by hammers and bulldozers wielded by people who had been touched by Western soft power.

Smart political leaders have long understood that values can create power. If I can get you to want what I want, I will not have to force you to do what you do not want to do. If a country represents values that others find attractive, it can economize on the use of sticks and carrots.

A country’s soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture; its political values, such as democracy and human rights (when it upholds them); and its policies (when they are seen as legitimate because they are framed with an awareness of others’ interests). A government can influence others through the example of how it behaves at home (such as by protecting a free press and the right to protest), in international institutions (consulting others and fostering multilateralism), and through its foreign policy (such as by promoting development and human rights).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China has tried to use so-called “vaccine diplomacy” to bolster its soft power, which had been damaged by its secretive handling of the initial outbreak of the coronavirus in Wuhan. The government’s efforts have been aimed at reinforcing its Belt and Road Initiative, which supports infrastructure projects in many parts of the world.

But international polls show that the results have been disappointing. In measures of attractiveness, China lags behind the US on all continents except Africa, where the two countries are tied. One reason for China’s lower level of soft power is its heavy-handed use of hard power in pursuit of an increasingly nationalist foreign policy. This has been on full display in its economic punishment of Australia and in its military operations on the Himalayan border with India.

China has a smart-power problem. After all, it is difficult to practice vaccine diplomacy and “wolf-warrior diplomacy” (aggressive, coercive browbeating of smaller countries) at the same time.

True, international polls showed that the US also suffered a decline in soft power during Donald Trump’s presidency. But, fortunately, America is more than its government. Unlike hard-power assets (such as armed forces), many soft-power resources are separate from the government and are only partly responsive to its purposes. For

example, Hollywood movies showcasing independent women or protesting minorities inspire others around the world. So, too, does the charitable work of US foundations and the freedom of inquiry at American universities.

Firms, universities, foundations, churches, and protest movements develop soft power of their own. Sometimes their activities will reinforce official foreign-policy goals, and sometimes they will be at odds with them. Either way, these private sources of soft power are increasingly important in the age of social media.

The January 6, 2021, insurrection at the US Capitol certainly damaged US soft power. But those who would mourn the death of American democracy prematurely should bear in mind that the 2020 election drew an unprecedented turnout despite the pandemic. The American people are still able to unseat a demagogue in a free and fair election.

This is not to suggest that all is well with American democracy or its soft power. Trump eroded many democratic norms that now must be restored. Biden has made strengthening democracy at home and abroad a goal of his presidency, but the results remain to be seen.

No one can be certain about the future trajectory of any country's soft power. But there is no doubt that influence through attraction will remain an important component of world politics. As Mark Twain famously quipped, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." The same is true of soft power.

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Europe's Soft-Power Problem

European Council on Foreign Relation, May 4, 2022, MARK LEONARD, DIRECTOR

Although Europe has begun to make up for years of neglect in terms of defense spending, it remains woefully ill-equipped to win over other countries through the power of attraction and persuasion. Each side in the European culture war is uniquely unappealing to billions of people around the world.

BERLIN – The Ukraine crisis shows that the European Union has a problem with power. While its hard-power deficit has recently moved to the center of attention, its philosophical and political shortcomings are an even bigger concern. After all, given Germany's *Zeitenwende* (foreign-policy "turning point"), Finland and Sweden's debates over NATO membership, and the size of European rearmament spending pledges, Europe likely will have more military resources than anyone other than the United States before too long. But even then, it will have a soft-power problem. Europe is home to two identity-building projects, both of which are deeply alienating to the rest of the world. Each was represented in the second round of the French presidential election, where the incumbent, Emmanuel Macron, defeated the far-right nationalist Marine Le Pen to secure a second term.

Macron framed the campaign as a choice about what kind of civilization France – and Europe – wants to be. He portrayed his country as the ultimate embodiment of enlightened civic virtue. For him (and for Europeans like myself), the European project is an elaborate attempt to transcend the continent's bloody history of nationalism, imperialism, and genocide. The EU is meant to forge a new European identity based on civic principles such as international law (against "might makes right"), liberal democracy (against populist majoritarianism), privacy (against "surveillance capitalism"), and human rights (against the surveillance state).

This project implies a new kind of patriotism, and, insofar as it has succeeded, it has provoked a counterrevolution from those who believe that globalization and European integration threaten their wealth, culture, and status. Le Pen presents herself as the tribune of this new-old version of European identity. Describing Macron as a globalist agent of death who will lead France and Europe to cultural suicide, she claims to represent the forgotten farmers and workers whose interests have been sidelined for the benefit of economic elites and refugees.

The structural dynamics of the French electoral system have intensified the dialectical relationship between these two versions of European identity, with the traditional contest between the center left and the center right giving way to a showdown between Christian ethnic nationalism and civic internationalist patriotism. But France is hardly alone. One finds similar divisions across Europe. Movements to “take back control” have mobilized voters against the openness and internationalism that underpin the new European identity.

Europe’s internal culture war has undermined its soft power. The EU would like to think that it is an exponent of democracy, yet many of the world’s largest democracies – Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa – have been reluctant to stand with it on Ukraine. Europe’s warring identities have each contributed to this lack of global appeal. The problem with the European far right is obvious. Despite her appeals to religion and traditional values, Le Pen’s xenophobia, Islamophobia, and implicit white supremacy have alienated a large share of the global population, not least the world’s 1.9 billion Muslims. What is more surprising is that attempts by internationalists such as Macron to develop a civic identity have sometimes also reduced Europe’s appeal in many parts of the world. His version of Europe supports gender parity, minority rights, and environmental action, but it has also been increasingly willing to subordinate sovereign power to the imperatives of markets and supranational principles and institutions.

These new priorities have naturally been met with charges of hypocrisy. Many European countries that slammed their doors during the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis are now offering a warm, open-ended welcome to the blonde, blue-eyed refugees fleeing from Ukraine. And, as many attendees at this year’s Doha Forum noted, the West’s commitment to the principle of sovereignty in Ukraine rings somewhat hollow after years of Western drones patrolling the skies above Pakistan and Afghanistan. Weren’t these the same countries that changed international borders in Kosovo, overthrew Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, and invaded Iraq? Moreover, after raping the planet for centuries, Europe has now decided to present itself as a champion of climate-change mitigation and environmental protection.

What is most off-putting is the way that Europeans tend to universalize their own experience, often assuming that what is right for them is right for others (closer to home, an EU enlargement model requiring other countries to adopt an 80,000-page rule book is a case in point). For various historical reasons, most European societies have embraced a balance between majoritarian democracy, minority rights, and private property, and we now take this package of principles as a given. But as the Arab Spring showed, people elsewhere might opt for the right to vote without demanding the full package. Those who rebelled against authoritarian regimes sought to emancipate themselves, not to mimic the West.

As my European Council on Foreign Relations colleague Ivan Krastev and I have argued, the world seems to be moving from an era of imperialism to one of decolonization. In the former, the success of the capitalist economic model and new communication technologies helped spread Western ideas and values worldwide; but now, countries and societies increasingly want to celebrate their own values and culture.

This paradigm shift has profound implications for everyone, but especially for Europe. Powers that want to prosper will need to embrace a “sovereignty-friendly” idea of soft power. Failing that, we Europeans will always be accused of using our norms and standards to defend white privilege. We will remain at odds with the new project of decolonization, and thus out of step with much of the international community.

Mark Leonard, Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of *The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict* (Bantam Press, 2021).