



Can We Communicate with Europe?

By PENN KIMBALL

A TELEVISION broadcast via satellite not long ago featured Senator Robert Kennedy of New York and Governor Ronald Reagan of California fielding a barrage of questions fired by tiers of foreign students assembled in a London studio. Press accounts accented the confrontation between the two politicians. But to one just back from similar confrontations abroad, the striking quality was the ferocity of student questions about America.

Having recently returned from two months in Europe, most of which was spent in intimate contact with young Europeans, I am acutely aware of their attitudes about us. Europeans generally are horrified at events in Vietnam and reject out of hand any parallel between their experience with the expansionism of Hitler and a threat to collective security in Southeast Asia. All Europe is agog with the suspicion that the Warren Commission Report was a gigantic cover-up of the facts of the Kennedy assassination. (The charge alternates between the view that it was a Communist plot which the Administration is afraid to expose because it would ruin the détente with the Soviet Union, and the view that Southern extremists, probably aided by President Johnson himself, performed the black deed.)

None of these ideas is original. They have all been expressed in one form or another in the American press. But one is not prepared for the front-page play they receive day after day in the European mass media. While abroad, I seemed always to be one country behind Mark Lane, who was on a tour of European TV panel programs, or one country abreast of the latest reprint from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., digested and interpreted to put the worst possible face on the American presence in Vietnam. Since the other side of the debate is largely omitted, the effect on the audience, and especially the young audience, is traumatic. The consensus appears to be that America has gone berserk.

My own exposure to this thesis took place at a month-long session of the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies. The topic of study was "The Mass Media in America." The seminarians included thirty-seven Europeans—from Oslo to Budapest, from Warsaw to Madrid—who are in the youth of their careers in the

communication enterprises of their native countries. The "faculty" consisted of five Americans who have practiced journalism on U.S. newspapers, magazines, and television. The American penchant for self-examination is alien to most Europeans, although it is dangerous to generalize. (The dedicated Marxist from Zagreb brought along his collection of Benny Goodman records; the chauvinist from Paris spent evenings in the library reading Marshall McLuhan.) Since *Bonanza* and *I Love Lucy* are two of the most popular television shows everywhere on the Continent these days, the thrust of the discussion was to condemn the source of the corruption, America, rather than its universality.

Europeans are both fascinated and confounded by Americans in the flesh, who bear so little resemblance to those whom they read about in their papers. Individually, Europeans also belie their stereotypes: Englishmen can be warm and friendly; Frenchmen generous; Germans gay; Italians shy. The atmosphere of this exchange was a delicious combination of love and hate, beer and slivowitz, accusations and reconciliations.

WITH characteristic masochism, the American "faculty" brought along a stack of U.S. newspapers and magazines as well as some fifty hours of representative TV fare as a basis for discussion with their European "students." In general, the Europeans thought our newspapers to be forbiddingly huge, distressingly uniform, and loaded with trivia. Accustomed to their own models, they found too little "meaning" in most stories on world events. European news columns never lack for point of view.

The American cult of objectivity strikes Europeans as a means for dodging the issue rather than as a control against bias. It is ironic that in the case of the Kennedy assassination it should have been the American Establishment that has sought to avoid fixing the blame on conspiratorial foreigners, and Europeans who take us to task for not succumbing to our historical impulses. As Walter Lippmann has pointed out, it is quite possible that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was simply the mindless act of a deranged individual with no "meaning" whatsoever. The drive for more meaningful coverage in American papers, a worthy effort, suffers at

times from the temptation to leap to simple conclusions on the basis of very inadequate information. European accounts of American policies are loaded with such theories, delving into the deepest thickets of supposed motivations.

The Vietnam war in the European press is frequently analyzed in terms of American taste for brutality and violence, the profit motives of munition-makers, or the alleged racism of a Southern President. Such analyses are not unknown in our own periodicals, but the canons of our mass media at least require the attribution of such statements to their source, leaving the reader to judge their credibility. European writers suffer no such inhibitions. They advance their interpretations as if from a pipeline to God.

APART from their boredom with the relatively tame fare in the American press, the effect of their editorial environment on the young Europeans gathered in Salzburg was a curious ambivalence concerning, on the one hand, the American "fixation" about Vietnam and, on the other, their own certainty that there was really nothing going on there for rational individuals to discuss: Why didn't we simply get out and be done with it? Outside of islands of sympathy among the delegations from Scandinavia and Switzerland—of all places—the Vietnam business became a conversation-stopper. It was too tiresome or too embarrassing a matter to discuss seriously before otherwise pleasant Americans unable to share the unanimity of civilized opinion.

It was easier to talk about U.S. commercial television, the absurdities of which become dramatically apparent when viewed in a baroque castle in a far-off land. One forgets how the sensibilities are dulled by continuous exposure until one sits in a darkened room with one's fellows from other cultures to observe the typical fare of a U.S. electronic evening. The canned laugh tracks become excruciatingly unbearable. Eric Sevareid on Vietnam is interrupted in mid-thought for a salad-oil commercial; the room erupts in laughter, and the Americans squirm with agony. This, after all, is our finest effort in the public interest.

The first, and possibly last, edition of *The Salzburg Review*, a mimeographed publication put out by the student body

of the seminar on the mass media, contained two contributions which sum up better than I can the European reaction to a sampling of American TV. The following was written by a young Polish girl ordinarily working as a researcher for Radio Warsaw:

The waste land of freedom
two hundred millions of absolutely
free monads
billions of free words and pictures
going straight into the hell of empti-
ness.

And from a young British producer for the BBC, under the title *Epitaph for a Commercial Station*, this arrow to the heart:

This is the fifteen-minute warning
The cold war is over
The hot line's gone dead
The missiles are coming
—But first, a word from our sponsor
Eat, drink,
And be merry
At your local cemetery

This is the ten-minute warning
London is burning
And Paris in ashes
—Stand by for an important announce-
ment
Pop Corn
Pop Corn
Predigested Pop
Undemanding Corn
The best diet
Just try it

This is the five-minute warning
The sea is boiling
The sky has gone black
—We're closing down with this mes-
sage:
Good Buy
Good Buy
We wish you all a last Good Buy

State-controlled television in Europe suffers from problems of its own. During the French elections last spring, General de Gaulle manipulated his government's system of allocating political time shamelessly to his own advantage. Even the supposedly insulated BBC has bent to the wrath of Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

During our stay at Salzburg one of the events of the year was staged in Vienna by Eurovision, the interlocking network for cultural exchange among Western European countries. This highlight was an international song contest in which tunes written by the nationals in all the member nations were sung on stage by artists from each. Juries watched the performance in every capital and phoned in their votes for the winner, although barred from voting for their own national representative.

The production combined the worst features of the Major Bowes Amateur Hour, Miss America contest, and elec-

tion-night "calls" on American TV. The music was generally of the guitar-and-shout school, already recorded by record companies crouched to capitalize on the huge exposure of the Eurovision winner. The hands-down winner was Miss Sandie Shaw, a platinum-haired transplant from California to London, who gyrated in a mini-mini-skirt before a set of revolving mirrors to the staccato beat of "Puppet On A String," which even as this is written is climbing the disc-jockey charts in America. A pretty young Swiss, singing old folk airs in native costume, received no votes at all.

WHILE it may be argued that imitation is the sincerest form of scorn, the Americanization of European broadcasting only serves to exacerbate the hostility of European "intellectuals" toward us. We are the extravagant uncle who corrupts the innocent children with his unworthy gifts.

If the issue can be joined at all, it is over what Europeans regard as America's defeatism in dealing with the private rape of the public resources of broadcasting. The fanfare in the States over the seductive new concept of "Public Television" triggers the question: What indeed is "Private Television"? The idea that commercial interests should be left free to exploit the major share of the air waves, in exchange for lip service and a little conscience money to a puny effort in the public interest, seems to Europeans to be a capitulation to the forces of evil. When the idea seems to carry the endorsement of most of the status figures in American society—foundations, statesmen, educators, businessmen—they conclude that indeed the Philistines have triumphed. The commercial networks and the advertising sponsors, just as they have been saying all along, are too powerful for America to handle.

It would be an error to conclude from their criticisms that the younger generation in Europe is all that preoccupied with the United States of America. There, as here, the young talk of generation gaps and the hypocrisy of everyone over thirty in their own societies. They

dance with the same curious combinations of splendid isolation and total entwinement with one another. Their mood is existentialist. The new Europe is turning inward upon itself, as if caught between two gigantic and somewhat mad forces which may snuff out European lives in an eyeblink but about which there is little to be done. "Eat, drink, and be merry at your local cemetery" expresses both their cynicism and their capacity for living it up while it lasts. They can be critical of America, but they are not really curious about us.

The interesting exceptions were those from Iron Curtain or near-Iron Curtain countries—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia. When the lights burned late in the excellent American library at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, it would likely be one of these students poring over American periodicals, books, and research reports. Whatever their motives, they came to learn. Argue they would, and passionately, for special circumstances of their own systems. But whereas West Europeans seemed resigned to a thousand years of history, the East Europeans pumped for every contemporary scrap of information they might be able to use.

One rather dour Czech spent a dancing evening sitting on the sidelines before rising to cut in on the wife of an American faculty member. Although he confessed that he had never waltzed before, he swept his partner into a swirling pattern of Viennese smoothness. He had been studying the steps from his seat and mastered all but the detail of how to reverse. When his breathless partner sought to compliment him on his achievement, he replied solemnly: "I do nothing that I do not do well."

If the boast has a faintly American ring, it has been noted before that there is an affinity between Slavs and Americans, despite their ideological cleavages, that is not always apparent in the motherlands of Europe. Even Czech films, which have been winning artistic acclaim all over the world, are suffering these days from an American affliction. Czech audiences stay home and watch television instead of supporting these highly creative efforts at the box office; the charge is that they are too highbrow for the masses.

To be neither understood nor loved is, of course, the price we Americans pay for our power. Our faults are also the faults of others. If we have a special weakness, it is perhaps our eagerness for the good opinion of strangers. In our defensiveness and self-deprecation, there may be some consolation in this final accusation, advanced in halting English by a perplexed Marxist from one of the states of Eastern Europe.

"The trouble with you Americans," he said, "is—you are all too hap-pee!"



HOW USEFUL ARE FILM FESTIVALS?

By HOLLIS ALPERT

IF ONE POSSESSED the time, the enthusiasm, the stamina, and strain-proof eyesight, it would be perfectly feasible to spend 300 days out of the year attending film festivals. Well over fifty have been scheduled for 1967, and hardly does one end before the next one begins. The truly dedicated "festival bum," as the species is known (and it exists), will wander from Cannes to Pesaro, Italy, from Cracow in Poland to San Sebastian in Spain. He will turn up in West Berlin and, undeterred by political boundaries, will sample the fare in Moscow, or, in alternate years, at Karlovy Vary in Czechoslovakia. Having accomplished what is known as the first phase, he will take in festivals at Locarno and Montreal, cross the ocean again for Venice, and return to these shores for the Lincoln Center and San Francisco festivals, perhaps visiting Cork en route. And, because some festivals coincide, he will heave sighs of regret at having had to miss Vancouver, Thessalonika, and Acapulco.

No one will defend the contention that all these festivals are necessary. A festival for science-fiction films held each year at Trieste seems a bit far out. On the other hand, there are those who wouldn't miss the annual 16 mm festival at Evian, and others who find out about the latest in industrial films at Lisbon. Some festivals can be categorized as just a form of promotion, usually touristic. Not long ago, Atlantic City considered holding a film festival, thereby seeking to upgrade its image as a watering place. The project fell through for lack of a qualified festival director. Those qualified were much too busy elsewhere.

The best organized and most popular festivals are usually those that have some form of governmental or institutional backing. The full weights of the French and Italian governments are behind the Cannes and Venice festivals; the city of Berlin, with unofficial Bonn participation, hosts its annual festival; and there is no mistaking the official nature of the Moscow festival. Obviously, these respective governments

must feel there is something to be gained by playing host to film-makers from many different nations. For one thing, an honored film brings honor to its country of origin. For another, a festival provides the opportunity to put a country's best ideological foot forward—and its artistic foot, too.

IRON curtains have a way of being pierced by films, and the mutual interchange provided by films and the ideas they embody have a way of freshening the air in a particular country's industry. When Fellini's 8½ won at Moscow in 1963 the people who sent up the greatest cheers were those from so-called Iron Curtain countries. They felt they were being given new life and new latitude for their own work, and it was not long before new directions were discovered in films from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Rumania.

Yet it has become customary to question the purposes of film festivals. They are decried as offering neither the best nor the most representative. They are said to be surrounded by too much hoopla, by excessive commercialism, and the prizes are thought to be bestowed only after long infighting and sometimes governmental intervention. Some say the very fact that there are so many festivals vitiates the value and importance of all of them. Our native film industry takes the most downbeat attitude of all. Major film companies see little to be gained by placing their products in competition in festivals. Movies made available prior to their general release are, to be sure, often lambasted in advance and their box office chances are thus thought to be harmed.

If film festivals are to be regarded as merely one aspect of film commerce, then the complaints of Hollywood have some point. But there is a growing recognition in many quarters, including our State Department, that much more than commerce is served by festivals, and particularly by those that have great international prestige. These include, but are not confined to, those held at Cannes, Venice, Berlin, and Moscow.

Hollywood, sensing potential eco-

nomie benefit, has begun to pay marked attention to the Moscow festival, where a particular entry can be seen by 10,000 or 15,000 people. The trade bonanza should be immense if the doors are ever opened completely to Hollywood's products in the Eastern bloc of countries, and the biggest crack in the door is that Moscow festival. But more important is the breaking down of the communications barrier that a festival provides, and if a single reason were required to justify its existence, this is the one that would be sufficient. For film is the one medium that allows people of diverse languages and cultures to best understand one another. Subtitles and simultaneous translations help complete the job of understanding. It is this aspect of universality that accounts, I suspect, for the proliferation of film festivals all over the world, and also for their fascination.

Not only is a festival a place to see film. It is also a gathering, a convention—of official delegates, journalists, artists, politicians, functionaries, intellectuals, as well as the film-makers who give the festival scene its sense of excitement. There is a *lingua franca* at festivals, a trading of ideas. Parochialism is lessened, standards are revised and broadened. The refining process will occur at screenings, press conferences, social events, and sometimes in what might be called hand-to-hand idea combat. The blend can be both heady and exasperating. But it is, above all, stimulating.

FESTIVALS began in 1932 as part of the Venice Biennale, and, ironically, their origin was in a then Fascist country. After 1934 the Venice festival became an annual event, with a wartime interruption between 1943 and 1946. And it was in 1946 that they took on a truly international flavor, with France inaugurating its festival that year. The French festival moved to Cannes in 1947, and Venice and Cannes have been locked in a battle for prestige ever since, with Cannes holding a slight edge at this moment.

It was at the early postwar festivals of Cannes and Venice that the astonishing resurgence of Italian film-making received its first acknowledgement. Suddenly, with *Rashomon* a prize winner, it was realized that Japan had entered the lists of great film-making nations. Hitherto ignored film industries such as India's were discovered to have great artistic potential, particularly as exemplified by the directorial achievements of Satyajit Ray. Cultural luster came to Sweden through the films—first lauded at festivals—of Sucksdorff, Sjöberg, and Bergman.

Admittedly, the major portion of any one country's film production is bound to be mundane, made either for commer-