

Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans from 1800 to the Present*  
 Harper Collins: London 2006, £30, hardback  
 1617 pp, 978 0 00 255879 2

DAVID SIMPSON

## SELLING EUROPE CULTURE

'Not all books are sold to be read. Some . . . are sold to be consulted'. Coming at the bottom of page 1,301 of Donald Sassoon's *The Culture of the Europeans*, this sentence has an arresting effect. Given its length—well over 600,000 words—size, weight, typeface and paper quality (almost but not quite India paper), this looks and feels like a book to be consulted in small doses, and it has some distinctly encyclopaedic qualities (along with a good index and very useful bibliography). But it neither claims nor achieves encyclopaedic coverage; it is explicitly thesis-driven, though the theses sometimes take a back seat when the author's descriptions begin to take on detail and extension. A dazzling achievement of summary and synthesis, it is also eminently readable.

Sassoon's opening gesture positions us on the London underground on a weekday morning in December 2000. People are reading newspapers, magazines and books, doing a crossword, perhaps casting an eye over the poems that appear posted up among the advertisements; others are listening to music through tiny earphones. 'The tube', comments Sassoon, 'is heaving with the consumption of culture'. The world of 1800, by contrast, was one of stark cultural deprivation: few could read or write, and most experienced music only in church or on special occasions. How did we get from there to here? The book charts two centuries of the 'extraordinary expansion of cultural consumption' throughout the populations of the European states, in broadly chronological fashion. Sassoon's theses may be summarized as follows: culture is a business which succeeds by the profitable reproduction of genres and motifs across both time and space. After 1800, its expansion was led primarily by the printed word, above all by the novel, and accompanied

by the sounds of a parallel musical efflorescence most profound in the German-speaking countries and Italy, which reigned over the opera. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, 'a book-reading public of some consistency begins to appear, and along with it a large number of printers and publishers, a network of lending libraries, and a proper book market'. So too do concert performances and musical instruments; from the early nineteenth century on, every middle-class family owns or feels it should aspire to own a piano. The years from 1830 to 1880 mark the 'triumph of bourgeois culture', as the consolidation of the market facilitates further diversification of genres, and a consequent expansion of the market.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, cultural markets for books and music are matched and perhaps overtaken by the mass-consumption made possible by the advent of new technologies in sound and image, the record (1889) and the motion picture (1895). The speed was astonishing—Paris had 10 cinemas in 1906; in 1908 there were 87. In the USA the spread of movie-culture was still more dramatic: from a 'few dozen' in 1906 to 10,000 in 1910. From that point on, according to Sassoon, culture has been and is becoming more and more American, thanks to the financial power of the US media corporations and the uniquely representative market-research resource embodied in its highly diverse, immigrant-based population. Film and recorded music are more fully embedded in capitalist business practices than any previous media: they are bigger, work faster and make more money than ever before. The process is driven by a recursive cycle whereby European models are recast for a US mass-market and then, with their added surplus value ensured by a tradition of protectionism, exported back to a willing European market. Though consideration of genres other than film and music, such as fine art, might make the relationship look less one-way, from the interwar period on, to talk about Europe is also to talk about America.

Between 1920 and 1950, this American advance took place in the context of expanding state control over broadcasting networks: first radio, then television. But since about 1980, these have been increasingly displaced or outflanked by global media dominance and by the sheer proliferation of apparent choices. Sassoon does not lament the seeming disappearance of the great Modernist dream of radically effective high-cultural experimentation. Eschewing the rhetoric of the 'single-minded moralists' in favour of the impassive analysis of the historian, he seems happy enough with a future governed by YouTube, the iPod and blog: 'there will be more fragmentation and more diversity' in this world of democratized information and empowered consumers, but 'there is no more reason to lament such diversification than to lament the so-called cultural imperialism of the very recent past.' A

world without culture, he ends by saying, would be 'even more savage than that facing us now'.

In seeking to confirm these findings, Sassoon presents a vast array of facts—some of them quite recondite—in a tour de force of the statistical sublime. We learn, for instance, that in the 1870s only twelve novels were serialized in the Transylvanian press, eighteen in the 1880s, and thirty in the 1890s, and that the majority were French. Yet although his account is packed with statistics in both narrative and tabular form, Sassoon is properly sceptical of the evidence they provide: how many novels Dumas really wrote is open to question, as is the matter of what proportion of them were readable and actually read in, for example, Greece; bestseller lists in Italy in the 1930s might well have been rigged; figures from Communist countries are always to be suspected; and as recently as 1997 vastly discrepant figures for sales of the same book can be found in published sources in the neoliberal homelands, a.k.a. Britain. These are among the hurdles Sassoon has to negotiate in putting together his arguments, and he does an admirable job in signalling the problems of evidence without giving up on the whole idea of making sense of the many such figures he has.

There are three related questions I find myself asking of this book: what is Europe, what is culture, and what is a market? I raise them not in the spirit of opposition but in hopes of setting out the project's strengths and limitations. First, Europe. It would be petty to complain that Albania, Finland and other small states do not get the coverage here that is afforded to Britain, France, Italy and Germany, when Sassoon's undoubted contribution is that they appear at all. Nor do they figure in the role of the merely factoid: the data are always part of an analysis, for example of the comparability and translatability of various cultural forms as they move from larger to smaller national markets. Some might, however, feel that the increasing American cultural dominance over Europe from the 1920s on is not as simple or as uncontested a process as is here proposed, given the importance of national broadcasting companies in the rise of TV and radio.

Second, what counts as culture for Sassoon is a difficult issue: an apter title might be something like 'Some Components of the Market History of European Culture' (to echo an important essay of 40 years ago). For in Sassoon's account, 'the story of culture . . . is the story of production for a market'. Less obviously commodified elements of culture such as science, philosophy and social theory are omitted, as is the impact of, for example, the Napoleonic Wars. Implicitly (for this is not discussed head-on), political history matters relatively little here. We are told, for instance, that German and Italian fascists were either unconcerned about or unable to stem the tide of American films being shown in their cinemas—they could not 'risk depriving their public of its main form of entertainment'. Or perhaps they

were anxious to hang on to a mass media forum for the distribution of newsreel footage which they could and did control? In such a narrative, movements of broader cultural importance largely disappear from view—one mention of Yeats's folkloric inclinations, for instance, hardly stands in for an account of Irish literary nationalism. Avowedly avant-garde figures like Pound and Godard (both unmentioned)—those who take pride in *not* selling their goods—also fare badly; though of course, the fact that some smaller-circulating writers sell fewer books than others does not make them culturally insignificant.

Readers of *The Culture of the Europeans* will find plenty of novels, a good deal of popular culture (comics, newspapers, pop music, stage shows, films, mass-circulating novels and stories), a good deal of music (opera and concert performances) and detailed attention to the newer media of radio and TV. But there is rather little poetry, and attention to non-fiction is minimal, even though any regular issue of a 'quality' paper will review at least as many non-fiction as fiction titles. Religion gets very short shrift, although we are told that 14 per cent of all books published in 'Germany' in 1835 were of a religious nature. Sport is ignored almost completely; yet can one make a serious estimate of Hungarian culture in the early 1950s without considering the career and public image of the Golden Team? We are told that televised coverage of Premier League football eats up one third of BSkyB's budget, but this is the only mention of a European football culture which subsists by filling stadiums at unprecedented cost to the spectators, and by selling shirts and other merchandise. The omission of fine art, meanwhile, is attributed to its reliance upon non-reproducible commodities. But hardly any major art exhibition these days functions without mugs, T-shirts, tote bags, catalogues and prints; thus the importance of exhibitions from Boydell and Belzoni to 'Sensation' is largely ignored. Moreover, if a market only becomes of interest to Sassoon when it is made up of reproducible commodities, the considerable number of pages this book devotes to opera and the theatre would seem to be quite out of place.

The book's bravado claim is its focus, 'quite unashamedly, on culture as a business', yet we are given little account of its operations; the narrative relies almost entirely on sales and distribution figures. One way to analyse a market is to look at the supply side of cultural forms: in the case of books, what were the print runs, costs and prices, and does format make a difference? How was distribution and advertising handled? When and how did market research take hold in the various culture industries, and how effective has it been? There is little such information in the book: the evidence given is mostly about consumption. But it is important to know what the investors thought might happen, and planned for. In film, for example, Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* was lavishly funded but turned out to be a flop,

while James Cameron had trouble getting the money to produce what would become his record-breaking *Titanic*. Many of culture's defining moments are unforeseen; they are not the result of a rational market strategy. If we simply look at what happened, we have a history written mostly by the winners. Sassoon's contention is that culture operates as a subset of capitalism in general, in that it 'feeds on itself and is limitless', is inevitably impelled toward global circulation and 'is the mechanism for its own subsequent growth'. Is its history then also, like that of capital, full of dead bodies, drained by vampiric forces and emptied of all connection to concrete labour? If so, where are they? The silence of dead forms is hard to write about, to be sure, but some record of the flops would tell us much about the business of culture and how those who profit from it cut their losses.

All cultural production is a risk, according to Sassoon, and proceeds by trial and error. Even Fascist states can only ban books, they cannot force anyone to read the ones they do permit. He writes well about the conservatism that results from an awareness that all investment in culture is a risk: this is one of the strongest elements of the book, as it explains how success builds upon success. What is newly marketed tends to be a pastiche of what has previously sold well, as is classically apparent in the history of the detective story. A similar process occurs among and between different media: the film of the book or book of the film, the reworking of Zola's novels into the more profitable form of plays, the parallel lives of comic strips and film and, most economical of all, the redistribution of vinyl records as CDs at virtually no extra cost. In contrast to the common lament that the rise of one cultural form inevitably involves the decline of others, as if there were a finite amount of attention to be shared around, Sassoon demonstrates that the history of the different media is often one of mutual assistance. Thus in the 1930s the British popular dailies offered their readers cheap sets of Dickens; film-making and theatre have tended to employ many of the same actors; and television saves films by running them on the small screen. He mostly suggests that this is a good thing, rather than seeing it as evidence of a monopolization effect that has each medium simply echoing the protocols and perhaps the content of the others.

Content: if the word *ideology* ever appears in these hundreds of pages, then I did not notice it. The term has been differently defined and hugely contested—the debates themselves an index of the difficulty of defending any single, comprehensive model of how a cultural artefact reflects or refracts its social-historical moment. Hence the recent preference for 'discourse', which seems to promise a more manageable concept independent of any need to wrestle with such theoretical warhorses as 'base' and 'superstructure'. A hard-nosed statistical analysis might reasonably feel able to ignore this terminological minefield in favour of just running the numbers. If it

does so however, it will need to be careful in speculating about causes and effects, lest it discover that terms like 'market' and 'business' are no more foundationally secure than the ones they are intended to displace.

*The Culture of the Europeans* makes a series of claims about cause and effect. Verdi, for instance, comes to look like a smart investor making the most profitable and conscious use of market analysis. Italian opera became dominant on the size and strength of its home market, and could then be launched globally (or at least across Europe) by taking its stories and settings from abroad in 'an active search for global renown'. Why so? Is this the invisible hand of a capitalist enterprise that must expand or perish? A response to the saturation of the home market? Is it the same thing as the pan-European popularity of the historical novel as pioneered by Walter Scott? The pattern of incremental expansion of markets is surely credible, but it is never opened to contestation. Its applicability thus seems empirical and case by case, and at some points it is argued (as with TV soap operas) that the domestic market is what counts, because the items do not work well as exports. Jules Verne made many of his major characters foreign, and Hollywood films such as *Casablanca* were acted and produced almost entirely by non-natives, albeit financed by Americans. But what guarantees the appeal of foreign actors and characters? And if there are no such guarantees, how and where can we track the deliberateness of these choices?

Elsewhere it is the American film's 'special effects', not its multinational roster, that are proposed as the main source of appeal to a global audience. Why should special effects appeal more widely than, say, love scenes? Some closer account of whether and how cultural markets are rationally predictable or hopelessly irrational would help a lot here. The USA itself, currently the source of much of the world's culture, is for Sassoon all-too-adequate proof of the idea that 'hegemonic countries are provincial, inward-looking and narcissistic', as evidenced by the 'facts' that 91 per cent of books sold there are by American authors and that almost no foreign programming appears on American TV. It would have been interesting to see here some account of the process whereby the supposed cosmopolitan market strategies of Hollywood cinema do or do not accord with this dismal state of the US domestic market.

The degree to which this kind of analysis is inevitably post facto leads to a certain tautology in some of Sassoon's findings: things happened because they happened. So France and Britain's dominance in nineteenth-century cultural production depended on their 'ability to produce cultural goods of prestige and popularity'. The theatre's success in the age of television is attributed to its offering something the audience 'could not get from the screen in the box at home', but if the theatre were dying out one could have the argument exactly the other way round, and television would take

the blame. What is the rule that explains a desire for something different as opposed to more of the same? At one point we are told that 'the age of nationalism produced a cosmopolitanism among the middle classes, who showed a growing interest in other countries', but one could as easily argue the opposite if one were explaining some instance of militant insularity like a fascist book-burning. Nor am I persuaded that the introduction of recorded music meant that serious composers 'were forced to innovate radically in order to distinguish themselves from their predecessors': as the book argues elsewhere, the advent of recordings could have maximized the temptation to copy, with only minor variations, the tried and true formulas of the most successful recordings. Things happened, and we try to explain them, but they did not have to happen.

This I think Sassoon would accept: everything is a risk, nothing is inevitable. The virtue of doing the numbers is not that a whole picture is presented but that the broader trends show up in a way relatively uncluttered by local complexities of space and time. But in order to have a readable story numbers are not enough; there must also be vivid conjectures. No literary critic will be impressed with being told that the success of *Don Quixote* can be explained by its openness to 'a variety of interpretations'. Astonishingly, the low estimation of German films in France in 1944 is said to owe 'little to anti-fascist feelings, it was just that German historical films and light operettas were not to French taste'.

Sassoon's claims are premised on an appeal to a world of facts. There is little theoretical self-consciousness or engagement with those who have theorized large parts of the materials covered here. Franco Moretti is cited only as a provider of useful statistics, and never as the source of some contentious debates about the globalization of the novel form; Baudrillard goes unmentioned, as do Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Kittler, Pascale Casanova and Manuel Castells, among others. Missing too are the more closely detailed researches of Peter Garside and James Raven, upon which Moretti for example gratefully builds.

Obviously there will be errors as well as oversights in a project of this scale, which must rely on secondary sources that cannot be checked or re-tested within the lifetime of any single scholar. Robert Burns did not write in Gaelic as he is here said to have done, and Shakespeare was not accepted as *the* English writer in the mid-1600s—this came a century later, as Sassoon himself elsewhere suggests. Victorian and Edwardian poets were hardly 'forgotten' when they found themselves, as Kipling and Tennyson did, written into the school curriculums and memorized by millions. And if the 'great dictators of the interwar period' did not *regularly* address audiences over the airwaves, thus sparing them consideration as part of the business of radio, was it not culturally significant on the occasions when they did so, to huge

numbers of people? A larger kind of problem occurs with the author's readiness in proposing undemonstrated general summaries, as when he claims that because the USA had no 'variegated mass market' before 1880 it was therefore in cultural terms 'still a colony'. Implicit here is a thesis about the analogous relation of national independence movements to mass print culture, but it is never announced or tested out as governing the sphere of cultural independence. One cannot sum up the cultural identities of Melville and Whitman by observing simply that because they were writers of 'Anglo-Saxon' heritage, they were thereby shackled to British cultural models.

If Sassoon's discussion of individual writers inevitably remains somewhat selective, there are compelling accounts of Zola, Scott, Sue, Dickens, Dumas, Hugo, Verne and Ségur, to remain simply in the sphere of fictional prose. Zola is accorded a chapter to himself, about halfway through the book. Was he perhaps the last high-cultural writer who managed his own work as his own business, and as such the icon of a certain nostalgia for the days when business seemed to have visible names and faces, and when what travelled across national borders was of unarguable critical substance? Sassoon's verdict on the effect of the Dreyfus affair on Zola's reputation has an altogether more contemporary ring: it 'turned him into a celebrity, a brand name'.

*The Culture of the Europeans* discusses a broader sample of subcultures than one has any right to expect in any single volume. Its bibliography and source materials should provide indispensable supplementary documentation on any given area. Above all, it should be stressed that Sassoon's historical account never descends to a mere listing of interesting facts. Even the details of the Transylvanian serializations have their place in a more sustained analysis. Whether it be about TV in Soviet Russia, pop music in the DDR or the apparent tolerance by fascist states of the circulation of American movies, I cannot imagine that any reader will fail to learn from this ambitious and challenging book.