I'T'S official: Godzilla is a box-office disappointment. The critics hate it, which was to be expected. But what killed the beast was terrible word of mouth. Even lifelong Godzilla fans like myself are baffled by the fact that the producers of Independence Day could fail with $150 million where a bunch of Japanese guys with a rubber suit and some toy tanks succeeded.

Nevertheless. Here's a prediction: this movie about a big green monster will prove to be a major international hit, for reasons not unrelated to its lackluster American performance.

Godzilla is the latest, biggest manifestation of a troubling dynamic working its way through American popular culture. More and more, Hollywood is catering to its customers, and they are not us.

For years, Europeans—most notably the French—have explained the commercial triumph of American over European cinema, both here and abroad, in terms of two factors: bigger markets and better marketing. Their argument in brief says that our film industry is massively profitable thanks to the economies of scale implicit in a domestic market of 260 million people. More money means more flashy American movies crowding out foreign (read: more deserving) films. Secondly, because of our vast heterogeneous population, America has, out of necessity, mastered the art of mass marketing.

Though there are several more powerful explanations for Hollywood's success (such as that American movies about war and love are simply better than art-house films about chance encounters in used-book stores), there has always been a bit of truth to the Euro-analysis. America's melting-pot culture has long required writers and producers to aim for the broadest possible audience. Cultural handwringers lament—often correctly—that this results in an indus-
Foreigners will love Godzilla not only for the sparseness of its dialogue and plot line, but also for its fundamentally anti-American nature.

HOW then should we, as Americans, feel about this all-new force for cultural dumbing down? There's no need to be outraged at entertainment products like Baywatch. After all, the idea behind the show exceeds in venerability Aristotle's theory of aesthetics: people like looking at un-American concept. The first, black-and-white Gojira, released in Japan in 1954, was a cautionary tale about mankind's folly in releasing the horrors of the atom. The Americans were implicit villains because we had dropped the Big One, opening Pandoras's box. The explicit villains were, obviously, the Japanese—still in a state of denial about deserving to have the Big One dropped on them.

Americans have never really cottoned on to the we-deserve-to-get-our-butt-kicked school of movie-making. Nevertheless, Godzilla and its 14 sequels were fairly popular in America. We have never made a monster movie based on our national victimhood, but our sense of Schadenfreude allows us to enjoy such works by and about others.

But in the new Godzilla, the Japanese are largely absent. This time it's the Americans who play the clods. The villains are, of all people, the French (their nuclear tests in Polynesia create the modern beast). And in a twist as unbelievable as a 120-foot fire-breathing monster destroying New York City, the omnipotent and super-brave heroes are also French.

Now, making the French ("cheesecake surrender monkeys," according to one character in The Simpsons) the Rambos of the story, and the Americans the helpless POWs, as it were, is quite simply bizarre.

Unless you take into account why the film was made. With Independence Day, Godzilla's producers, Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin, created a rip-roaring good time in which the Americans, naturally, saved the world from alien invaders. Even though ID was an international blockbuster, it still met with considerable criticism and market friction in some countries because of its pro-American plot—as if we should just as logically have expected the Belgians to save the world.

Still, the producers needed an encore. Godzilla seemed ideal. Jurassic Park proved that giant lizards equal full theaters in America. In Japan, Godzilla's a sure thing, why else make 15 of them? Jean Reno (the mysterious French commando in the movie), although still fairly unknown in America, is huge in Europe and Asia. French nuclear testing in the South Pacific—not that we care—was one of the biggest international issues of the decade, almost bringing down Prime Minister Chirac. Above all, perhaps, there was the attraction of squashing Americans for a change.

Which is why I fear that the logic of Godzilla will be applied in the future with increasing frequency: the combination of no plot, no dialogue, lots of bones getting crushed and buildings getting destroyed, all with an anti-American subtext, may be the formula Hollywood has been searching for to really open up those international wallets. I predict that, like so much background nuclear radiation, global market forces will continue to mutate Hollywood's major products. Some intellec-
tuals cheer the "Americanizarion" of global culture. Instead, we may be witnessing the globalization of American culture. In a two-superpower Cold War our culture's global appeal was great. In a unipolar world, even our friends might like to see us knocked down a peg or two. Is America prepared for Hollywood to make movies the world loves but we don't?

FILM II

Idle Idyll

JOHN SIMON

The idea behind The Truman Show sounds ingenious. A baby, Truman Burbank, is born in a special enclave—a giant television studio somewhere in California—and grows up inside TV without realizing it. He thinks he is in the real world, but is actually surrounded by actors in the made-for-TV coastal town of Seahaven, which comes complete with pristinely Norman Rockwell houses, fake sun and moon, and a sizable bit of ocean. Everything in Truman's life is fictitious: his job as an insurance salesman, his cheery neighbors, his rough-hewn best friend, and his pretty wife, Meryl, a dedicated nurse.

The whole thing is the idea of a combination TV producer and mad scientist, Christof, who, from the control room, devises the day's events: when, for example, Truman is to be caught in the rain (a rain that, at first, maladroitly concentrates on him alone), or when his father is to drown in a sailing accident, though not when he is to fall in love with a young woman, Lauren, who wants to clue him in on the truth. Christof has her denounced as psychotic and whisked away; it is given out that she has moved to Fiji.

Jim Carrey does not so much play Truman Burbank as be him, which in any other role might be an asset, but here comes across as stultifying.

The idea is to supply American and world TV viewers with an ideal small town, an ideal bunch of down-home folks, an ideal marriage, and the perfect Everyman hero. As we are frequently shown, people the world over watch raptly this idyllic microcosm, this earthly (or unearthly) paradise, with Christof improvising peripeteias to make Truman's life more interesting, but never too disturbing. Right now Truman's chief hope is to get to Fiji, attempts to reach Lauren by phone having, of course, failed. At the travel agency, Truman is told he must book a month in advance, which seems to stump him. Also, pictures on the agency walls show aerial disasters to discourage Truman from flying; I wonder what they use to discourage him from thinking.

For it would take an idiot to be taken in by all this, and if Truman is an idiot, why should we care? But the actors involved in this hoax must be idiots too, to give up their real lives and participate full-time in this imposture. And how much money would it cost to stage such a gigantic charade? (To be sure, commercials are sneaked into the show.) And why would an attractive young actress become Meryl and be actually married to this dunce of a Truman?

The unbelievable thing about The Truman Show is Jim Carrey. If ever there was a Plasricman whose life could be pumped into him from the outside, he is it. In fact, he does not so much play Truman as be him, which in any other role might be an asset, but here comes across as stultifying.

Obviously, Andrew Niccol, who wrote the thing, and Peter Weir, who directed it, had something bigger in mind. Seahaven has to be at the very least America, with some kind of evil power pulling the strings—the media,