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**AMERICA AND THE EUROPEAN  
SENSE OF HISTORY**

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## AMERICA AND THE EUROPEAN SENSE OF HISTORY

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The ways in which Europeans have tried to make sense of America constitute a special chapter in the European history of ideas. At first glance what strikes us in the bewildering variety of European readings of America is the recurring attempt at formulating the critical differences that set America apart from the historical experience and cultural conventions of European nations. America is never seen as purely *sui generis*, as constituting an alien entity to be fathomed in terms of an inner logic wholly its own. There is always the sense of America being a stray member of a larger family, a descendant from Europe. If it belongs to the *genus proximum* of Western civilization, the point was to define the *differentia specifica* according to an almost Linnaean taxonomy. European conventions have always served as the yardstick, implied or explicit, in European attempts at uncovering the rules of transformation that had cut America adrift from the European mainstream. Hardly ever, though, is this intellectual quest for the crucial difference entirely disinterested. Rather than merely being an academic exercise, more often than not there is an existential urgency involved in the exploration of the American difference. If Europe serves as the standard for measuring difference, the outcome of such measurement is always geared to a discussion of its potential impact on Europe. In other words, there is always a triangulation going on, in the sense that the reflection on America as a counterpoint to European conventions functions within a larger reflection on Europe's history and destiny.

If this may seem unduly to intellectualize the repertoire of European views of America, I hasten to say that in addition to the more intellectually articulate versions there are vernacular, or popular, versions. Widely shared and informing everyday conversations, they may seem more like unreflected stereotypes, providing ready answers to those trying to make sense of the many Americas that reach them in their daily lives through the modern means of mass communication. Yet we should not exaggerate the difference between the intellectual and the vernacular views of America. At both levels a similar triangulation takes place, less articulate perhaps at the vernacular level, yet similar in so far as people make sense of America in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. Their constructions of America, shared with peer groups, focus on American counterpoints which then help them develop individual and group identities different from models and standards prevailing in their home setting.

There are yet other ways in which we can explore the similarities underlying the European views of America. If we look at them as so many narrative accounts of perceived differences, they appear as repertoires of metaphors. Again, the metaphors are many, yet a deep structure underlies them of much greater simplicity. In a recent publication<sup>1</sup> I have proposed the reduction of these repertoires to essentially three underlying dimensions which are remarkably stable irrespective of time, national culture, or class. Always these three main dimensions served to structure a discourse of cultural difference, of "Us"—people in Europe—versus "Them"—the Americans. Of these three main dimensions one

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Kroes, *If You've Seen One, You've Seen the Mall: Europeans and American Mass Culture*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

is spatial, contrasting an America seen as flat, reducing European verticality, hierarchy, the sense of high versus low, of cultural heights and the feeling of depth, to purely horizontal vectors playing themselves out on the surface, exteriorizing what to Europeans is the inner life of the soul. The second dimension is temporal, to do with a contrast that casts Americans as lacking the European sense of the past as a living presence. The third dimension represents all those views that see American culture as lacking the European sense of holism, of organic cohesion; Americans in this view are never loath to take the European cultural heritage apart, dissecting it into component parts and recombining them in total irreverence to what has grown in historic and spatial specificity. These three dimensions form the discursive formation of Europe's "occidentalism," the underlying structure of meanings, as Raymond Williams called it, capable of spawning an endless number of meaningful sentences and individual utterances ranging from the highly subtle and nuanced to the coarsely stereotypical. Yet in spite of all variation at the level of explicit statements, it is my point that the motifs they use are resonant of repertoires that are more widely shared among the larger public and are of remarkable historical stability.

Two further points need making here. Often the metaphorical repertoires of European occidentalism were used to reject America and its culture, but not always. When European intellectuals elevated America as an example for Europeans to emulate, the same metaphors could serve their expressions of praise. Similarly, at the vernacular level, readings of American culture as a counterpoint to established European cultural modes have used the same metaphorical dimensions for the representation of America, yet at the same time the general appreciation changed from rejection to reception. Developments in Cultural Studies during the last fifteen years or so have helped to shed light on the processes of the transmission and reception of popular/mass culture, and on the way that American culture has influenced the processes of identity formation among younger generations elsewhere. These generations, during our century, rather than meekly reproducing their national cultures, or at least parental cultures as imposed on them, more often than not selectively appropriated American popular culture for acts of cultural rebellion and resistance. What needs further exploration in this context is the way in which European constructions of America were a dialectical exercise in which the real discussion among those at the receiving end was about the national identity of their home country, in the larger context of a debate about Europe. When national elites or non-elite groups use references to "America," or to "Europe" for that matter, we have to see them in the light of infra-national discussions concerning the contours of the national identity, French, German, British, and so on.

As a second point I should emphasize that for all the stability of the discursive formation of European views concerning America, it is like a dormant resource. Clearly in the continuing European/American encounter some moments are more likely to trigger a European interpretative response than others. Thus, for instance, the 1920s was not just like any other preceding decade in the way that America forced itself upon the European consciousness. In the wake of World War I the United States had, literally if not physically, become a presence in Europe, inducing Europeans to a renewed and urgent reflection upon the American identity. America's intervention in the war, the presence of its armies in Europe, the massive advent of its mass culture in following years, allow us to look at World

War I as a watershed. The war forced Europeans to reconsider their traditions, their economic, social and political plight, in short their collective destinies, but they could no longer do this without making the case of America a constituent part of their reflections. If there are continuities in the ways that Europeans have made sense of America, history has also known abrupt leaps in the relative distance that Europeans have felt towards America, like floodgates opening.

In the following I propose to take this argument further and to highlight the intricate interrelations between these distinct levels of response to the cultural difference presented by America, but perceived and given meaning by Europeans. The way I shall do this is by focussing on one critical period first—the Interbellum—analyzing ways in which European intellectuals used America in their critical reflections on the plight of Europe and of their respective nation states. I shall then change perspective, moving in time towards the post-World War II period, focussing not on the elite but on the way in which America affected non-elite groups in their sense of self and of history.

### **The Interbellum—Anguished European intellectuals and their views of America**

“I confess that in America I have wished to see more than just America. I wanted to find an image there of democracy itself, of its inclinations, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to get to know it, if only at least to find out what hopes or fears it holds for us.” These words from Tocqueville’s preface to his *Democracy in America* aptly summarize an attitude that is more generally characteristic of European observers of the American scene. Whether their interest was cultural, political, economic, or social, their observations more often than not were inspired by a sense, anguished or hopeful, that America provided Europeans with a view of what the future held in store for them. This sense was made more acute by the intimation that not only did America offer a glimpse of Europe’s future, to be perceived by merely juxtaposing American settings to conditions in Europe, the country was also seen as the historic agent of Europe’s future. Even those observers who in their more lucid and detached moments were willing to grant that both the United States and Europe were set on a parallel course of social and cultural transformation, with America being further advanced along that road, often assumed that America would already have left its typical imprint on the forms of the future before these would reach Europe. All the more reason, then, for those of this cast of mind, to watch American developments closely in order better to be able to fend off the threat of Europe’s Americanization, and to prepare strategies of cultural resistance.

Many were the voices in Europe during the interwar years calling for a defense of Europe’s cultural heritage, defined either in terms of national identities or of a larger entity called “Europe.” As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the line dividing both levels of argument was never neat. Clearly the need for defense in the face of a challenge as massive as the one posed by America, called for a canvass equally large: Europe. In that sense European critics of American culture may ironically have much to thank the Americans for. If indeed the

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<sup>2</sup> Kroes, *op.cit.*, 82-84.

American challenge led them to argue their defensive case in terms of a larger construct, called Europe, the idea of Europe and Europeanism appeared like the dialectical mirror image of their views of America and reinforced the reflection by Europeans on the contours of their own larger frame of identification and affiliation. Even so, however, if European intellectuals did not argue their case in terms of clearly national contours, rising to the defense of national cultures and national identities, a discourse cast in terms of national concerns and modes of reflection was never far below the surface. Thus, various Europes transpired in their arguments, appearing as thinly veiled versions of hallowed national identities. While French critics of American culture and civilization elevated a view of Europe that showed the typically French preoccupations with individual creativity and craftsmanship, German critics tended to favor a view of Europe in a more collectivist vein, of the *Volk* seen as the carrier of a collective *Kultur*.

Not only do we see how the image of "Europe" is often cast in characteristically national terms, more generally we can say that "Europe" often served as no more than a flimsy rhetorical veneer. More often than not it could hardly paper over the fault lines between the various national cultures. An amusing example of this can be found in André Siegfried's writings. In 1927 he wrote the preface to a study by André Philip about labor conditions in America—*Le problème ouvrier aux Etats Unis*. It is a study about the place of the worker in an industry that had become organized around the tenets of Fordism, of Taylorism, of standardization, of mass production, and above all of "le machinisme." Siegfried lauds Philip as a "bon européen" (a good European) who had set out to measure American labor conditions by a European yardstick of humanist values. He remembers how he himself had only become aware in America of "le monde européen comme un ensemble." (the European world as a whole). Only in America "on prend conscience d'une réalité qui nous échappe ici, c'est qu'il existe un esprit européen, dont l'esprit américain est souvent la parfaite antithèse." (one becomes aware of a reality that escapes us here, namely that a European spirit does exist, to which the American spirit often stands as the perfect opposite). From a moral point of view America, new as it is, has been cut off from our twenty centuries' old traditions by the hiatus of emigration across the ocean; it no longer shares much with the old Europe that is still in direct communion with Rome, with Greece and even with India. Clearly up to this point Siegfried conceives of Europe "comme un ensemble," as an integral whole. But it isn't long before he begins to add individual detail to his picture: "Parmi les peuples européens, le français est celui qui a eu, le plus, la conscience de ce qu'est un individu, un homme ..." (among the European nations, the French is the one that has had the clearest sense of what it means to be an individual, a Man...). France clearly takes pride of place in the European ensemble, embodying some of the core values of Europeanism. But Siegfried does not leave it at that. He goes on to single out one other country from the European whole, describing it as an America in Europe: Germany. "Les Allemands, si semblables à tant d'égards aux Américains modernes, se sont jetés dans la standardisation avec une sorte de passion, comme ils font toutes choses. Il n'est point d'Allemand, aujourd'hui, qui ne chante avec conviction l'hymne de la 'rationalisation'; celle-ci répond évidemment à leur génie de discipline, avouons-le aussi, à leur manque de personnalité." (The Germans, so similar in so many ways to the modern Americans, have hurled themselves on to a course

of standardization with a kind of passion, as they always do. There is no German, today, that does not with conviction sing the praise of 'rationalization'; the latter clearly accords with their mind for discipline, and, let us admit it, their lack of personality). So much for the European ensemble.<sup>3</sup>

Unsubtle as Siegfried may have been in this passage, it is a good example of the kind of triangulation that I am exploring. Gauging the nature of American culture with a view to resisting it more successfully, European critics were torn between defensive positions centering either on their national cultural setting or on a larger European frame of reference. In smaller European countries like the Netherlands the latter point of orientation may have come more naturally to the minds of critics of American culture, yet even in their case the plight of their national culture was always at least an implied concern. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga may be a good case in point. For one thing, in his reflections on America, he was never solely the historian in his Olympian role of detached observer. He was rather a historian in the role of intellectual, aware of his public calling to probe and make sense of historical trends as these affected the life of his contemporaries. But also, and this is a point of direct relevance to my argument, he was a man who throughout his work performed a continuing triangulation. When he wrote about Dutch culture, he explored it as a variant of European culture, trying to define its specificity. When he evoked life in Europe on the eve of the Renaissance, he did it with a view to producing a picture of European culture that European countries had moved away from since under the impact of larger forces of modernization. When he wrote about America, either as a historian or as an astute observer of its contemporary scene, he did it with European or Dutch culture at the back of his mind. Finally, in his later, darker musings on contemporary history losing form, America is the unnamed site where he had earlier seen these forces of entropy at work. In the following paragraphs let me explore a little more in depth the uses that Huizinga made of America in what were truly reflections on the plight of European culture in the interwar years.

### Huizinga's triangulations

Upon his return from his only visit to the United States, Huizinga expressed himself thus: "Strange: among us Europeans who were travelling together in America ... there rose up repeatedly this pharisaical feeling: we all have something that you lack; we admire your strength but we do not envy you. Your instrument of civilisation and progress, your big cities and your perfect organisation, only make us nostalgic for what is old and quiet, and sometimes your life seems hardly to be worth living, not to speak of your future"<sup>4</sup>—a statement in which we hear resonating the ominous foreboding that "your future" might

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<sup>3</sup> The quotations are from André Siegfried's preface to: A. Philip, *Le problème ouvrier aux Etats-Unis*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1927; xi, xv.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Huizinga, *Amerika levend en denkend: Losse opmerkingen*. Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink, 1927, p.126. The translation is by Herbert H. Rowen, published as: *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision, From Afar and Near*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p.312.

well read as “our future.” For indeed, what was only implied here would come out more clearly in Huizinga's more pessimistic later writings, when America became a mere piece of evidence in his case against contemporary history losing form. Thus, in 1935, in his *The Shadows of Tomorrow*, there is the following sweeping indictment: “The number, so it was said, washed across the individual; the mass dragged the individual along, defenceless, and lowered him to a level that always was the largest common denominator of the more simple and coarser features, while levelling and washing away the more complex and 'higher' expressions of the individual. New regimes could stimulate these coarsening trends and use for their own purposes such negative feelings like rancour, vengefulness and cruelty.”<sup>5</sup> Still later, in an essay written when World War II already raged across Europe, he would once again connect this more general sense of cultural decline to America: “... the modern world is becoming more and more accustomed to thinking in numbers. America has hitherto been more addicted to this, perhaps, than Europe.... Only the number counts, only the number expresses thought.”<sup>6</sup>

Huizinga may have inveighed against an obnoxious Americanism, against an “America” in quotation marks, yet he could not be mistaken as a mouth-piece for a vulgar anti-Americanism. He was too subtle-minded for that, forever aware of the counter-argument, of ambiguity; he was also too open to the real America, as an historical given, to relinquish the mental reserve of the quotation mark. The Huizinga quotation from his book of travel observations, which already was full of ambivalence, continues: “And yet, it is *we* that have to be the Pharisees, for theirs is the love and the confidence. Things must be different than we think.” What strikes us in this rejection of what Europe was wont to call Americanism, is the intellectual sense of wonder, of admiration even, and of an affinity with and appreciation of that other variety of Americanism, that heritage of highminded ideals that had inspired so much of American history. Thus, in his 1935 essay on the Dutch cast of mind<sup>7</sup>, he did ponder the onslaught of ominous trends of a machine-like organization of social and political life—of the mechanization of life, as he called it—trends which he had earlier seen as typifying life in America; yet at the same time he saw a countervailing force in Dutch virtues of tolerance and a sense of liberty which had formed the nation around its myth of origin in a historic struggle for freedom and independence. It had set the nation apart as a “noble part of Western Europe,” finding its center of gravitation across the sea. It found its partners in the Atlantic world, where freedom was still preserved. In its westward orientation “lay the strength and *raison d'être* of our existence,” as Huizinga saw it.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, in Huizinga's attempts at triangulation, casting America as the pure type representing more general forces of social transformation, we easily recognize the repertoire of metaphors that were current among critics of American culture during the Interbellum. If from that perspective we judge Huizinga by the company he kept, he did in

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<sup>5</sup> J.H. Huizinga, *In de schaduwen van morgen* (1935), Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink, 1950; Collected Works, Vol. VII., pp.313-424.

<sup>6</sup> J.H. Huizinga, *Over vormverandering der geschiedenis* (1941), Collected Works, Vol. VII, pp. 192-207.

<sup>7</sup> J.H. Huizinga, *Nederland's geestesmerk* (1935), Collected works, Vol. VII, pp. 279-313.

<sup>8</sup> Huizinga, *Geestesmerk*, p. 312.



fact use language that others put in the service of a more facile anti-Americanism. In the above quotations we already have clear examples of the metaphoric deep structure of a European discourse casting America as the counterpoint to European cultural traditions. When in America Huizinga longed for “things old and quiet,” the triangulation may well have implied the monastic, medieval Europe that Huizinga affiliated with so strongly. In the Europe of his time he may well have felt similarly estranged, yet there was more of a living past, a sense of connection to the forms of earlier European history, which America could never provide. In his 1926 collection of travel observations there is one such moment of epiphany, reminiscent—ironically—of Henry Adams’s affiliation with the European Middle Ages. While ranting about the banality of the cultural forms that Americans used to shape their cultural consumption, Huizinga pauses to reminisce on a few hours spent in Cologne, in between trains. Contemporary Cologne aggravated him. The holy city on the Rhine had become ugly and banal (not unlike, Huizinga seems to imply, the America of his day). But leaving the indifferent street life behind him, in the semi-darkness of a church where mass was being celebrated, Huizinga suddenly realised what a true ritual is, what it represents as a cultural value and a cultural form. It was like an act of communion with a past in which these things to all were the essence of life.<sup>9</sup>

Observations like these, it may be clear, we can group among a repertoire of metaphors that all have to do with time, casting an America that critically lacks a sense of the past as the antithesis to a Europe where the present is meaningfully related to life in the past. The other Huizinga remarks that we quoted above, rather illustrate a second metaphorical dimension, one that contrasts America and Europe in terms of spatial images. America is typically seen as the country eroding European cultural heights and sense of depth. It typically does so by reducing quality to quantity, intrinsic value to exchange value, individual difference to the uniformity of numbers. Huizinga’s observation that, in America and increasingly in the Old World as well, only the number is seen as capable of expressing thought, is in a sense a mild form of the more pejorative European view that Americans reduce everything to dollars. Other variations in this second, spatial repertoire point to the exteriority of life in America, as a life literally on the surface, shallow, lacking depth, devoid of the European sense of the tragic.

Huizinga’s contemporary, Oswald Spengler, in his *Jahre der Entscheidung*, argued along similar lines, only with greater dramatic emphasis. Highlighting the European sense of *Tiefe* (depth) and *Seele* (soul), as well as the element of true historical tragedy, he actually merged two metaphorical dimensions, the spatial and the temporal, into one: he connects the shallowness of life in America to its lacking a sense of true *historical* tragedy. Others, following a later world war, would have a similar hunch. Albert Camus, following his 1946 visit to the United States, had this observation: “The afternoon with students. They don’t feel the real problem; however their nostalgia is evident. In this country where everything is done to prove that life isn’t tragic, they feel something is missing. The great effort is pathetic, but one must reject the tragic *after* having looked at it, not before.”<sup>10</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre at about the same time had similar observations on the absence of a tragic sense

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<sup>9</sup> Huizinga, *Amerika levend en denkend*, p. 165/6.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, *American Journals*. London: Sphere Books, 1990; p.42.

of life in America. The country, for all its blithe optimism, struck him as tragic in a rather pathetic way, due precisely to this absence. In his early postwar study of European views of America, André Visson, an expatriate Frenchman, already commented on the ironies of this peculiar complaint by European intellectuals. There is indeed a strange psychological mechanism at work among European intellectuals who tend to pride themselves on their tragic sense of life rather than admitting to feelings of collective guilt about Europe's suicidal orgies in two world wars. They turned feelings of envy and inferiority towards America, as the country that had twice saved Europe from its worst excesses, into a sense of intellectual superiority. The contrast indeed between the splendor of life in a victorious America and the miseries of war-torn Europe may have been too much to confront directly. Only rarely do we come across an unmediated expression of this contrast. Camus comes close to putting it into words: "... I am literally stupefied by the circus of lights. I am just coming out of five years of night, and this orgy of violent lights gives me for the first time the impression of a new continent. An enormous, 50-foot-high Camel billboard: a G.I. with his mouth wide open blows enormous puffs of *real* smoke." According to Visson, Sartre like many other European intellectuals seems convinced that Americans are fundamentally unhappy. Sartre—and Visson quotes him—met Americans who, "though conventionally happy, suffer from an obscure *malaise* to which no name can be given, who are tragic through fear of being so, through that local absence of the tragic in them and around them."<sup>11</sup> But clearly, the perception of Americans as a people essentially unhappy, because unable to rise above their collective mad dash for happiness, is as old as Tocqueville's observations on 'the sentiments of Americans.' Equally clearly, it is an ineradicable habit among observers of cultural difference to translate their experience of outsidership—after all: they are the outsiders trying to look in—into the language of quasi-inside reports. Small wonder, then, that never having been on the inside, they tend to report on voids and absences. Never having probed much beyond the surface, all they find worth mentioning is that the "other" culture has nothing but surface to offer. In all such cases, observations *from* the outside are not more than observations *of* the outside.

At times Huizinga seemed aware of the metaphorical quality of his exercise in measuring the difference between America and Europe along dimensions of polar opposites. Thus, in the diary he kept while traveling in the United States, published posthumously, there is this observation, made almost literally in passing: "In the morning from Philadelphia to Baltimore. The landscape has something light, something *ingénu*, *sans conséquence*, lacking depth, as if one dimension were missing.(! *sic*) At times everything here makes that impression. As if, orbiting in a sphere around the essence of things, one is suddenly moved out to a more distant, wider sphere, at higher speed but more remote." Simply watching a landscape from a train, he must have become aware of the deeper logic underlying his attempts at ordering his observations of critical differences and contrasts between America and Europe. Otherwise his hunch that in American landscapes a vertical dimension is missing, when taken literally, does not make much sense. Yet he was never fully aware of the full range of dimensions he used in making sense of the American difference.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Visson, *As Others See Us*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1948; p. 149.

So far, we have recognised two dimensions in Huizinga's order of observations, the spatial and the temporal. These two may well be the ones most commonly found in European constructions of America, triggered more in the way that stereotypes are, like ready-made categories of observation and interpretation. They are, as we argued above, an indication more of the facile leap of outsiders who try to pose as vicarious insiders than the result of any imaginative attempt at interpreting differences in terms of the inner logic of the other society, the one under intrigued scrutiny. Things may well be different with the third dimension of metaphors, conceiving of America as lacking the European sense of the organic cohesion of cultural forms and styles. Not only do Americans tend to discard the established European hierarchies, ranking cultural forms in terms of high versus low, and do they irreverently recycle the European repertoires, blurring high culture and mass culture, in their production, distribution, and appreciation or consumption of culture. Also, at every level, whether in the adoption by Americans of European forms and styles of high art, or in more technical areas of production for the market, a spirit of blithe and irreverent bricolage is at work, which does not shrink from taking things apart and putting them together again in different forms, put to different purposes.

Huizinga may have been at his most astute in exploring this difference in the mental and cultural habitus of the Americans. At times his appreciation of the difference could be highly positive, as in his attempts at accounting for the radically American nature of authors he liked, such as Emerson and Whitman. They had, he argued, to differ from European standards; there was no way they could hope to rival European authors by trying to emulate the artistic forms developed in Europe. These forms had grown in Europe, in temporal and spatial specificity, and could be of no use for an expression of American thought and creativity. Formlessness was what innovating American authors had to experiment with. At other moments, though, similar perceptions led Huizinga to make more critical judgments inspired by an over-all sense of a cultural degeneration and loss in America of things valued highly in Europe. Particularly in his more anguished perceptions, of course, Huizinga was never solely the detached observer. Europe was always foremost on his mind, as the cultural domain likely to be tainted by trends observed in America.

These concerns were more central to his second than to his first book about America. Examples abound. American journalism, for instance, typified this fragmenting approach to the news, cutting its meaningful links to a larger history unfolding. The fragmenting of the news, the separation of current events from their historical context, the reduction of the news to, as Huizinga put it, "Slogan, the brief, catchy phrase," all constituted, as he saw it, "a regression of culture." They all resulted from America's being a mass democracy and would therefore, in due course, come to other mass democracies as well, a case, clearly, of parallel developments, with Europe following closely on the heels of America. Yet, interestingly, Huizinga also connected these trends, as observed in America, to a strictly American background factor, the "anti-metaphysical cast of mind" in America. This mentality was the lasting heritage of an Enlightenment rationalism that had more firmly entrenched itself in America than anywhere else. "Do we not feel as if placed back in the eighteenth century?" Huizinga wondered. And, he continued, "the anti-metaphysical cast of mind naturally implies an anti-historical one. In spite of a flourishing and superbly organized practice of history [as an academic endeavor] America's mind is

thoroughly anti-historical. A historiography that in the march of humankind wants to see purely the theodicee of progress, is not the true kind." Or, as he put it elsewhere, the American is directed towards the present and the future too much to be open to the mystery of the past.<sup>12</sup>

Whoever lives totally in the present, has no sense of historic meaning and context. Nor will such a person have a sense of organic cohesion. For indeed, anything that can be conceived in terms of internal coherence has a historical dimension, or, shall we say, a historicist specificity in its configuration of constituent elements. As a general theme it can be taken as indicative of the third metaphorical repertoire used by Europeans to give expression to American cultural defects, as they saw them. Once again Huizinga provides us with a telling example. When introduced to the Dewey Decimal System, the system for the systematic filing of library holdings as recently adopted in America, he recognized a quintessentially American impulse at work. As he saw it, time and time again living organic connections in the body of human knowledge were sacrificed to the need for classification. The human mind had been made subservient to the tyranny of the decimal system. It confirmed his intimations concerning the anti-metaphysical bent of the Americans and their inclination toward subjecting the spiritual realm to the dictates of technical organization.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, then, in his attempts at making sense of America as a cultural counterpoint to Europe Huizinga used the repertoire of Europe's language of "occidentalism." His reflections were geared in part toward gauging the inner logic, the cultural *modus operandi*, of a civilization intriguingly at odds with European conventions and habits of mind. Yet his more central concern, particularly in his later writings, was with the portent of his reading of American culture for Europe's destiny. Typically, in his musings on American civilization we see Huizinga taking this larger view. He perceives in America the first signs of a process of civilization that is much more general in portent: "Organization becomes mechanization; that is the fatal moment of the modern history of civilization."<sup>14</sup> His broader view, however, does not make his mood of cultural demise any less acute. Yet he is aware that without mechanization there will be no civilization at all: "The process of refining culture is inseparable from that of instrumentalization." The process, however, has two distinct effects; it has a power-to-bind and a power-to-liberate. And it would appear ("taking America as the most perfect example") as if the balance tends too much towards the first, toward the subservience and bondedness of the individual, rather than towards setting him free. Huizinga goes on to ponder the possibility of whether the instrumentalization of life in America might not work out differently than in Europe: "Organization in the sense of standardization means the establishing of a uniform and well-defined technical nomenclature ... to the American it constitutes not only an individual need rather than a necessary evil, it also constitutes a cultural ideal ...

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<sup>12</sup> Huizinga, 1927, p.175.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, this observation is from Huizinga's first book on America: *Mensch en menigte in Amerika*. Collected Works, p.332/3.

<sup>14</sup> For Huizinga's views on the mechanisation of contemporary life, see his *Mensch en menigte in Amerika* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1918), chapter II, and his *Denkend Mensch en Menigte* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1927), pp.14 ff.

Everyone familiar with their sense of conformity and collective identity will realize this. The American *wants* to be equal to his neighbor. He feels spiritually safe only in the normatively ordained, not to mention the fact that the latter also implies 'efficiency'." Typically, Huizinga is wavering here between two modes of interpretation. We recognize the distancing strategy when he tries to link the more ominous implications of the trend towards mechanization to character traits that he deems typically American. Yet at the same time he reminds the reader that he is taking America "as the most perfect example," implying that his cultural critique applies more generally.

There is a similar ambivalence in Huizinga's reading of another ominous cultural trend perceived in America, yet again of more general portent: the shift away from a culture centering on the word towards one centering on the image. Huizinga's views on film are a good case in point. They reflect the mixed feelings he had about America. At one point in his 1927 collection of travel impressions he went so far as to accept film as an art form, for which a new Muse or patron saint would have to be found. But he instantly qualified this position, pointing out that the "Movies"—as he put it in his Dutch text—are a mere illustration, albeit the most important, of an ominous shift in our civilization—away from reading to watching, away from the printed word toward "ideographic" information. Yet again Huizinga was ambivalent. Pondering the impact of film as he had witnessed it in America, he was aware of its democratic potential. Film was Whitmanesque in its capacity to restore a democratic vista, allowing people a comprehensive, if vicarious view of the variety of life in their society. Yet, at the same time, Huizinga's more pessimistic views of the mechanization of contemporary culture qualified these high hopes. As one of the new mass media, film, like radio, aimed at a mass audience, catering to its average taste. Film tended to simplify and stereotype its message. It might widen people's views of society, but only spuriously so, through a flattening of the social and cultural landscape. "[Film] habituates the nation from high to low to one common view of life. Due to its limited means of expression, its highlighting of what is external, and the need to appeal to a general audience, film shuts off entire areas of spiritual activity. It imposes a limited number of standard views of life that will eventually become the mass view."<sup>15</sup> Thus, film was one of the contemporary forces of cultural erosion that were at work in America. As an art form, visual though it might be, it would never create lasting, self-contained forms, like sculpture or painting. In its narrative flow film, to him, was more like literature or drama. Yet again, geared as film was to a mass market, like radio, it could catch the attention of its audience compellingly, yet only transiently, for fleeting moments. Unlike drama or literature, it could never cause the audience to pause and reflect.

Yet, mixed as Huizinga's feelings about film may have been, he managed astutely to define the inner force of a medium in a way that inspires the critical reflection upon film until the present day. Even today the academic study of film is centrally involved with the intriguing exchange between the imaginary world of the silver screen and the sense of identity of the individuals watching it. A process of identification with the shadows on the screen occurs that leads the audience to step outside itself. Huizinga made

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<sup>15</sup> Huizinga, 1927, p.28.

the following, perceptive observation: “[Film] shows the urban dweller country life, or at least an image of it, it shows the countryman urban life, it gives the poor a view of luxury and the rich one of misery, all highly stylized so as to make it easy to appropriate. Thus film rather works to conciliate than to sharpen class resentment. The repeated illusion of the life of the rich affords the poor a certain communion with luxury and refinement; its fantasy image becomes a part of their daily existence. In the hero the audience exalts itself, and, beyond this, film stars off the screen offer it a new model for emulation, a novel assurance of options open to everyone...”<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, in these musings concerning film as one modern medium for the mechanical reproduction of culture, and as such an illustration of the wider trend of the mechanization of contemporary civilization, we see Huizinga perceiving a tension between the promise of a democratic art and its fake realization as mass culture. Not only is he torn between two modes of appreciation of American culture, or two forms of Americanism we might say, capable of experimenting with new forms of a democratic culture, while at the same time subverting them through a subservience to the dictates of a mass market for cultural consumption. He also, in passages like these on film, shows an awareness of the media of transmission of American cultural influences to audiences elsewhere. It is one thing to declare in writing that America holds forth an image of Europe’s future, as so many of Huizinga’s fellow critics of America’s culture argued, it is quite a different intellectual challenge actually to explore the ways in which these dismal trends would be transmitted to Europe.

Huizinga had a keen and open eye for the ways in which the early forms of American mass culture worked to produce virtual phantasy worlds. In addition to film he was aware of the role that advertising began to play in the 1920s. In his travel notes, which would be the basis for his 1926 collection of essays, there is this observation from the streets of Chicago: “Looked at the advertisements. Rosy-cheeked boy with a smile and three packets of cereal: For that million dollar boy of *yours*. Puffed wheat.—Speculation on the love for children, health and the sense of dollars.—The advertisements, taken together, very clearly show an ideal, an ideal of no great reach. —Girls being offered a camel by an enamored boy, surf-riding girls with sun blisters. The girl on the telephone. Remember! Keep that schoolgirl complexion. Palmolive. Always the half-sentimental type, presented as pure and healthy, a variation and refinement of what Ch. Dana Gibson launched thirty years ago. The public constantly sees a model of refinement far beyond their purse, ken and heart. Does it imitate this? Does it adapt itself to this?”<sup>17</sup> Apposite questions indeed. As in his reflections on processes of identification among film audiences, Huizinga again is aware of the problem of reception of the virtual worlds constantly spued forth by a relentless commercial mass culture. More generally, in these musings, Huizinga touched on the problem of the effect that media of cultural transmission, like film and advertising, would have on audiences not just in America but elsewhere as well. In these more general terms, the problem then becomes one of the way in which non-American

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<sup>16</sup> Huizinga, 1927, p.28.

<sup>17</sup>J. Huizinga, *Amerika Dagboek: 14 April—19 June, 1926*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Contact, 1993; p. 93.

audiences would read the phantasy worlds that an American imagination had produced and which showed all the characteristics of an American way with culture so vehemently indicted by European critics.

In conclusion to this section, let me point out one cruel irony. If in his later writings Huizinga would dwell on the problem of contemporary history changing, if not actually losing, form, under the combined impact of forces of mechanization, industrialization, and the advent of mass society, he may, in spite of his sophistication and open-mindedness, have missed one crucial way in which people's sense of history was changing. Under the impact of precisely those media of mass communication that Huizinga had subtly explored, rather than ignoring or rejecting them out of hand, his contemporaries were beginning to furnish their historical imaginations with the ingredients of virtual phantasy worlds rather than the stuff that history used to be made of. What to Huizinga and other like-minded intellectuals may have been a mere epiphenomenon, hiding real historical forces from view, would provide the markers of history to generations growing up in the second half of our century.

#### **American mass culture and our changing sense of history**

Three vignettes to set the stage for our discussion. All three are taken from European films. Each represents a formative moment, if not an epiphany, in the lives of the films' protagonists. In each, it is America that provides the ingredients of these moments of revelation. Dramatically, these moments serve as epic concentrations, condensing into a single moment what normally is a continuing process of identity formation. The first example is from Jacques Tati's 1949 film, *Jour de fête*, the second from Alan Parker's *The Commitments*, released in 199?, and the third from Bernard Tavernier's *Round about Midnight*, which came out in 199?

In *Jour de fête* Tati satirized the modern obsession with speed, presenting it as a peculiarly American obsession, but one which was highly contagious. In later work, like *Mon oncle*, he would satirize other American infatuations, like the love of gadgets, labor-saving devices, automation and remote control. There he would show it as it had already invaded France, providing French appetites for a life of ostentation and invidious distinction with the snob value of American contraptions. Interestingly, in his *Jour de fête*, he would show us the moment of contagion. The protagonist of the film, a French provincial postman, at one point is shown peeking through a crevice in the canvass of a big tent. Inside a film is shown dealing with speedy American postal techniques involving virtuoso time-saving feats. The feats themselves are satirically transformed into nonsensical dare-devil acts of motorized mail delivery men jumping through hoops of fire, and of airplanes dropping mailbags which are picked up by postmen on motorbikes driving at full speed. Never mind. Many of the propaganda films shown in Europe under Marshall aid auspices and meant to instill a sense of American efficiency in the minds of Europeans, may well have been perceived and remembered as equally fantastic. In fact, what we see we see vicariously, as if through the eyes of our astounded postman. The images shown to us may well be the product of his eager imagination rather than conveying anything in the

actual documentary film. Later hilarious sequences then show the way in which Tati's postman has creatively adopted the American model, adapting his bicycle delivery act, while experiencing a new mail (male?) identity.

The other two film vignettes are variations on this theme of Europeans looking in from the outside, undergoing a culture shock, while experiencing it as a moment of conversion. In Bertrand Tavernier's film it is the encounter of a young Frenchman with American jazz in the late 1940s. Unable to afford the price of admission to a Paris jazz club where one of his cultural heroes is playing, we see him hunched outside a window, literally eavesdropping on a world of meaningful sounds, coded messages from an enticing, but far-away culture. As it happens, he manages to get in touch with the revered musician, recasting his own life into a mission of support and protection of the drug-ravaged career of his tragic hero. In Alan Parker's *The Commitments* another musical encounter makes for a moment of epiphany. A group of poor Irish boys watches James Brown on television do his archetypal primal scream. When the show is over the leader of this small group instantly translates the experience into terms relevant to the lives they lead in Ireland. "We have to become like him. He is like us. The Irish are the blacks of Europe, and we in our neighborhood are the blacks of Dublin. Black is beautiful." In disbelief his friends silently repeat the last words, their lips moving to form the words of the punch line. Black is beautiful. Slowly the message sinks in. Yet another appropriation of American culture has taken place, affecting the sense of identity of these youngsters. They are cast in the role of celebrants in a ritual of cultural conversion.

These moments of voluntary affiliation with American life styles and cultural models are a recurring feature of postwar European cultural production, in film, on television, and in literature. The three examples that I gave should be seen as only a sample of this larger body. A more comprehensive study would be of interest for two reasons. They would give us a sense of the many settings in which these critical encounters with American culture took place. They are like moments of remembrance as everyone growing up in postwar Europe will have them. They are the condensed memorable versions of the more continuing exposure to American culture that Europeans have all experienced. When taken together they are like an album of vignettes vividly illustrating the ongoing process not only of the forms of reception of American culture, but also of its selective appropriation, which is to say of the ways in which American culture was redefined and made to serve the cultural needs of Europeans. Settings of reception then become the crucial focus for analysis. They could have been defined by age, by class, by gender, by ethnicity.

Whatever the precise setting, it was always a matter of people finding themselves relatively at the margin of established mainstream cultural modes and molds, people who were not, or not yet, fully integrated into these dominant conventional forms. American culture, as they read it, provided them with alternatives of non-conventionality, informality, and a sense of freedom of choice, all in marked contrast to cultural conventions they were expected to make their own.

If this would be one reason to create our album of vignettes, there is a second one. In cultural studies the exploration of the process of reception, or of cultural consumption, is a nut devilishly hard to crack. Whatever area of mass cultural production one takes,



whether it is world's fairs, film, television soap operas, or literary forms like the romance, we are always dealing with mass audiences consuming these products. It is one thing to explore the programmatic strategies of the organizers and producers of such forms of mass culture, it is a totally different thing actually to gauge what the audience chooses to get out of them. Interesting response studies have been done in these areas, such as of housewives watching soaps, or of readers reading romances. But the larger the issue becomes, as in the case of the European postwar reception of American mass culture, the more formidable are the problems of how to study the process of reception. That is where a study of vignettes as I have suggested them above might play a role.

After all, as narrative moments in stories told by Europeans, they are like second-order evidence of the reception of American culture. They tell stories of reception. They are recycled, or reconstructed, moments meant to convey remembrances of critical cultural encounters. In that sense they are explicit indications of a process of reception. As such they are more open to research than questions of first-order reception. It is harder to see someone eating a Hamburger in Paris as making a cultural statement, expressing an identity challenging established conventions, than it would be to interpret a narrative passage, in a film or a book, presenting Hamburger consumption in precisely the light of a cultural peripety. Or, for that matter, it would be harder to find proof of a direct, first-order American influence in Alan Parker's style of film-making than it would be to trace his awareness of such influences taking place. After all, he turns them into the stuff of narration himself. This much may be clear, then: if moments of the reception of American culture, presented in the dramatic light of moments of epiphany, have become a recurrent feature of European story-telling, they testify to a degree of self-conscious awareness of the American cultural impact which it would be unwise to neglect.

Condensed into single moments, points in time serving as *lieux de mémoire*, to use Pierre Nora's felicitous phrase, all vignettes of the reception of American culture in Europe highlight what has truly been an ongoing process. Whatever conversion moments Europeans may vividly remember, they have all been more continuously exposed to an environment of free-floating cultural signifiers made in America. Confronted with an ongoing stream of vistas of the good life, as carried by media such as film, advertisements, television, music videos, they have walked through a duplicate world of images as a continuing accompaniment to their lives. They never walked alone. Highly private as the consumption of American culture may have been, eavesdropping on AFN broadcasts late at night and against parental wishes, watching a movie with a significant other, shutting out one's environment through the use of a Walkman, yet the cultural products that made for such private moments were at the same time consumed by many others, constituting a mass audience. These private moments, then, may well be seen as forms of collective behavior typical of contemporary mass societies. The very fact that the private consumption of mass culture is necessarily shared with many others gives mass culture its paradoxical quality of setting the public stage, giving an era its particular cultural flavor. Reminiscing, individual people become aware that they share similar cultural memories with others. They are able to reconstruct the feel of years past, evoking moments of cultural consumption that it turns they shared with others. Everyone knows the exhilarating moments discovering that others

enjoyed the same film or rock song one thought one had enjoyed privately. There is the sudden sense of a joint return to a past that briefly comes to life again.

In that sense modern mass culture, much of it in an American mold, has given our sense of history a particular coating. If Huizinga bemoaned the fact that history as he conceived of it was losing form, and escaped his capacity to recognize patterns of coherence and meaning, he must have been unaware of contemporary mass culture giving our sense of history this new coat. As a shared repertoire of recollections, allowing people to call forth an image of “the fifties” or the “the sixties,” the mass cultural mold of an era is certainly a new form that history has assumed. It serves people as a switch that allows them to connect private memories with public memories. More importantly, as in neural networks, such recollections often connect to historical events of a more traditional nature. We all remember such events through the images that the mass media brought right to our homes, like newspaper photographs, or television news flashes. Many of such images gain an iconic status, recapitulating an event in ways that leave an indelible imprint in our minds, as if on an etcher’s plate. Often such images start leading their own lives. They pop up time and time again, as in the case of Nick Ut’s photograph of napalmed Vietnamese children running in terror towards the eye of his camera. Many vividly remembered the photograph, when in the Fall of 1996, on veteran’s day its reading suddenly changed. The girl in the photograph re-appeared on the stage of history as a woman of flesh and blood, individualized, no longer solely an icon. On Veteran’s Day she came to a ritual of remembrance at the Vietnam War monument in Washington, DC, offering forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> A new meaning was added to an icon of mass culture that had long allowed us to give shape and form to our understanding of the Vietnam War.

There are more general ways, though, in which the coat of mass cultural memory is used to recreate the past. They are ways similar to the recycling of the process of the reception of American mass culture into individual vignettes into single moments of conversion. They are like a second-order, conscious use of the mass-cultural coat of history for the reconstruction of historical events. Again, the Vietnam War may offer apposite illustrations of what I have in mind. Clearly, Vietnam War movies in their own right are mass-cultural products adding to the sediment that mass culture leaves on our sense of history. Trying to evoke images of the Vietnam War, we often do so with the help of Hollywood’s attempts at rendering the war. Nor does Hollywood shrink from adding iconic heroes to our store of recollections, for instance in the form of Rambo as a latter-day raging Roland. Yet the very way in which many of these films go about taking us back to the historical event is through the use of collectively remembered mass-cultural products of the era. The music of the Rolling Stones and the Doors in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* trigger historical connections in the minds of contemporary audiences. Barry Levinson, in his *Good Morning, Vietnam*, made this connecting strategy the central ploy of his narrative. The high point of his film, of a wellnigh transcendent force, is his combined use of various tools from the realm of mass culture. In a sequence following Robin Williams’s announcement of just another song in his radio program for the American

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<sup>18</sup> See the report by Jan Scruggs, “A child of war forgives...,” New York Times, November 11, 1996.

forces in Vietnam, we hear the voice of Louis Armstrong singing "What a wonderful world." Accompanying the lyrics there is a jumble of images as any prime-time television news from Vietnam would show these. The structural logic of the sequence is similar to the standard music video, and ironically, the clip from the film was popular as such, following the release of the film. Merging the evocative force of Armstrong's voice with the logic of television footage into something which clearly appeals to our familiarity with music videos, Levinson manage to use all these mass-cultural triggers to produce a moment of transcendence; a bitter comment on the horror of the war. It makes us sit back and reflect, in spite of what prewar critics of American mass culture had argued in their mood of cultural pessimism.

Were these critics alive today, what would they have to say to these new forms that now play a role in shaping our sense of the past? Many undoubtedly would have seen it as the ultimate victory of a cultural inversion they had been the first to see as typically American, an inversion that replaces reality with its fake representations. From Georges Duhamel and Simone de Beauvoir to more recent observers of American culture like Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco the language may have changed from the straightforward invective to more esoteric formulae like *simulacrum* or *hyperreality*, the diagnosis remains essentially the same. They all come up with their own variations on the old Marxian theme of false consciousness. A man like Huizinga too might have been reluctant to see present-day forms of historical awareness as worthy replacements of the historiographic forms whose decline and ultimate demise he observed or foresaw. Yet he may have come closest to an historiographic perspective that has been gaining adherence in recent decades. His almost sociological sense of the role and function of rituals, ceremonies, and public spectacles in late medieval Europe, his keen sense also of the role that modern mass media played in providing frameworks for identification and self-definition to mass audiences, took him to the threshold of an epistemological seachange in the historiography of collective consciousness. Huizinga would have had no quarrel with a current relativism that sees collective identities, of nations, of ethnic groups, of regional cultures, as just so many constructions. Precisely the invented rituals of celebrating and memorializing such identities he would have recognized as dramatic forms of history that he himself had studied. Yet he may have disagreed as to the implied voluntarism of this perspective and its attribution of historic agency. In Huizinga's case in fact the agency rested with historians. It was they who shaped history into larger narrative forms. Much current historiography, however, places the agency in history itself and explores it in terms of group strategies, struggles for cultural hegemony, and the invention of rituals meant to rally people around strategic readings of their collective identity.

This takes us back to a problem I raised earlier. Exploring the strategic agency behind the formation of group identities and frameworks for identification is one thing. But there is always the further question as to why, at the level of individual reception and appropriation of the rival constructions, people opt for particular readings of their collective identity. How do we explore the meanings and significance, at the point of reception, of such rival appeals? What messages and representations of reality do people store and digest to render meaningful life histories? As I argued before, the mass cultural setting of our contemporary life is a powerful ingredient in these individual constructions. Yet at the same

time, as a setting that individuals have shared with countless others, it also provides them with a language of remembrance that they share with others. If, to quote Carl Becker, everyone is his own historian, we have to go down to the level of individual historical awareness and try to fathom the sense of meaningful history at that level. It may be highly private, yet at the same time as a private construction it draws on repertoires widely shared with contemporaries.

If this offers a challenge to historians today, it is eagerly taken on. When, for instance, historians are involved in the production of television documentaries about historic episodes they consciously draw on the repertoires of mass culture produced at the time. Thus, in the celebrated PBS/BBC series on the Great Depression, historic footage of farmers losing their farms is followed by a clip of Betty Boop, with the narrator reminding us: "Even Betty Boop lost her farm." The soundtrack sets the tone for recollection playing the iconic musical reflection of the mood of the time: "Brother, can you spare a dime?" Other footage shows us Busby Berkeley choreographies, such as the celebrated "Remember my forgotten man." Not only do these ingredients take us back to mass culture popular at the time, more specifically it makes us aware that mass culture at its best is able to reflect the pressing concerns of a period. There are many more instances of this increased awareness among historians of the masscultural forms of history. In search of audiences that want to see their personal histories displayed, books, special exhibits, and, yes, entire museums are now devoted to the everyday lives of common people, showing the advent of mass cultural products into their homes, work, leisure time pursuits, and so on. If mass culture has provided people with the rituals and ceremonies for the celebration of their collective identities, its time has now come to be celebrated in its own right.

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9

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