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Views of the Good Life: America's Commercial Culture in Europe

I must have been twelve or thirteen, in the early fifties, when in my home town of Haarlem in the Netherlands I stood enthralled by a huge picture along the entire rear wall of a garage. As I remember it now, it was my first trance-like transportation into a world that was unlike anything I had known so far. I stood outside on the sidewalk looking in. Not surprisingly, given the fact that this garage sold American cars, the picture on the wall was of a 1950s American car shown in its full iconographic force as a carrier of dreams rather than as a mere means of transportation. Cars in general, let alone their gigantic American versions, were a distant dream to most Dutch people at the time. Yet what held my gaze was not so much the car as the image of a boy, younger than I was at the time, who came rushing from behind the car, his motion stopped, his contagious joy continuing. He wore sneakers, blue jeans rolled up at the ankles, a T-shirt. His hairdo was different than that of any of my friends, and so was his facial expression. Come to think of it, there must have been a ball. The boy's rush must have been like the exhilarating dash across a football field or a basketball court, surging ahead of others. The very body language, although frozen into a still picture, seemed to speak of a boisterous freedom. Everything about the boy radiated signals from a distant, but enticing world.

This may have been my first confrontation with a wide-screen display of the good life in America, of its energy, its exhilaration, its typical pursuits and satisfactions. As I now think back on the moment, I am aware that my distant exposure to America's dreamscape was not unlike an astronomer's, catching light emitted aeons ago by distant stars. Metaphorically speaking America was aeons away from Europe at the time, feverishly engaged as it was in the construction of the consumers' republic and the pursuit of happiness that it incited. Beholding a picture of America in a garage in Haarlem, I was exposed to a representation of life in America in a rare reflection of public imagery that in America had become ubiquitous. Nor was it all that recent there. Even at the depth of the Great Depression the National Association of Manufacturers (N.A.M.) in typical boosterism had pasted similar images across the nation, advertising "The American Way" in displays of happy families

riding in their cars. Much of the jarring dissonance between these public displays and the miseries of collective life in 1930s' America still applied to Europe in the early 1950s. Those were still lean years. In Harlem I stood beholding an image that had no visual referent in real life anywhere in Europe. Yet the image may have been equally seductive for Europeans as for Americans. Consumerism may have been a distant dream in postwar Europe, yet it was eagerly anticipated as Europeans were exposed to its American version, through advertising, photo-journalism, and Hollywood films.

Now, as images of America's culture of consumption began to fill Europe's public space, they exposed Europeans to views of the good life that Americans themselves were exposed to. To that extent they may have Americanized European dreams and longings. But isn't there also a way we might argue that Europe's exposure to American imagery may have worked to Europeanize Europe at the same time? There are several ways of going about answering this question. It has been said in jest that the only culture that Europeans had in common in the late twentieth century was American culture. Their exposure to forms of American mass culture transcended national borders in ways that no national varieties were ever able to rival. True, there was the occasional Italian or German hit song running up the charts in other European countries. There were still audiences across Europe for films made in one or another European country. There were the 1960s when England contributed to international youth culture, in areas such as music and fashion, often giving its own characteristic twist to American mass culture that had reached England in the years before. But the one continuing line throughout the latter half of the twentieth century was of an exposure of European publics to American mass culture.

The points of exposure were not necessarily only in public space. Much of the consumption of American mass culture took place in private settings when people watched television in their living rooms, or Hollywood movies in the quasi-private space of the darkened movie theater. American popular music reached them via the radio or on records and once again made for a formation of audiences assembling in private places, such as homes or dance clubs. This private, or peer-group, consumption of American mass culture does not mean that larger virtual audiences did not emerge across Europe. Far from it. Shared repertoires, shared tastes, and shared cultural memories had formed that would make for quick and easy cultural exchange across national borders among Europe's younger generations. They could more readily

compare notes on shared cultural preferences using American examples than varieties of mass culture produced in national settings.

Yet this is not what I intend to explore here. There is an area, properly called public space, outside private homes, outside gathering places for cultural consumption, that has served across Europe as a site of exposure to American mass culture. Much as it is true that forms of American mass culture, transmitted via the entertainment industry, travel under commercial auspices – are always economic commodities in addition to being cultural goods, to be sold before they are consumed – public space is the area where American mass culture most openly advertised itself, creating the demand if not the desire, for its consumption. In public space, including the press, we find the film posters advertising the latest Hollywood movies, or the dreamlike representations of an America where people smoke certain cigarettes, buy certain cars, cosmetics, clothes. They are literally advertisements, creating economic demand, while conveying imaginary Americas at the same time. They thus contributed to a European repertoire of an invented America, as a realm for reverie, filled with iconic heroes, setting standards of physical beauty, of taste, of proper behavior. If Europe to a certain extent became “other-directed,” much like America itself under the impact of its own commercial culture, Europe’s significant Other had become America, as commercially constructed through advertising.

If we may conceive of this re-direction of Europe’s gaze toward America as a sign of Europe’s Americanization, it means an appropriation of American standards and tastes in addition to whatever cultural habits were already in place to direct people’s individual quest for identity. Americanization is never a simple zero-sum game where people trade in their European clothes for every pair of blue jeans they acquire. It is more a matter of cultural syncretism, of an interweaving of bits of American culture into European cultural habits, where every borrowing of American cultural ingredients creatively changes their meaning and context. Certainly, Europe’s cultural landscape has changed, but never in ways that would lead visiting Americans to mistake Europe for a simple replica of their own culture.

My larger point, though, is to pursue a paradox. Henry James at one point astutely perceived: it is for Americans rather than Europeans to conceive of Europe as a whole, and to transcend Europe’s patterns of cultural particularism. He meant to conceive of it as one cultural canvass of a scale commensurate with that of America as one large continental culture. His aphoristic insight certainly highlights a recurring rationale in the way that Americans have approached Europe, whether they are

businessmen seeing Europe as one large market for their products, or post-World War II politicians pursuing a vision of European cooperation transcending Europe's divisive nationalisms. If we may rephrase James's remark as referring to an American inclination to project their mental scale of thought onto the map of Europe, that inclination in its own right may have had a cultural impact in Europe as an eye-opening revision of their mental compass, inspiring a literal re-vision.

Whatever the precise message, the fact that American advertising appeared across European countries exposed traveling Europeans to commercial communication proceeding across national borders, addressing Europeans wherever they lived. More specifically, though, there is a genre of advertising that precisely confronts Europeans with the fantasy image of America as one, open space. If all American advertising conjures up fantasy versions of life in America, the particular fantasy of America as unbounded space, free of the confining boundaries set by European cultures to dreams of individual freedom, may well have activated the dream of a Europe as wide and open as America. The particular genre of advertising I am thinking of finds its perfect illustration in the myth of Marlboro Country and the Marlboro Man. The idea of tying the image of this particular brand of cigarette to the mythical lure of the American West goes back to the early sixties and inspired an advertising iconography that has kept its appeal unto the present day (at least in those countries that have not banned cigarette advertising). Over time the photographic representation of the imaginary space of Marlboro Country expanded in size, filling Europe's public space with wide-screen images of Western landscapes, lit by a setting sun, with rock formations glowing in deep red color, with horses descending to their watering hole, and rugged-faced cowboys lighting up after the day's work had been done. This was a space for fantasy to roam, offering the transient escape into dreams of unbounded freedom, of being one's own free agent. It was hard not to see these images. They were often obtrusively placed, hanging over the crowds in railway stations, or adding gorgeous color to some of Europe's grey public squares. I remember one prominently placed to the left of the steps leading up to Budapest's great, grey Museum of Art. The show opened right there. One couldn't miss it.

The formula was widely imitated. Other cigarette brands came up with their own variations on the theme, using different iconography, showing young couples in leisure time pursuits, or showing a jetset life style that one might vicarously share for the time it took to smoke a cigarette. In post-Coldwar Poland a roadside poster showed a young

couple, radiating joy, its text inviting the audience "to have a taste of freedom." The advertisement was for an American cigarette. But European cigarette makers as well adopted the approach, as in the French Gauloises campaign, using Parisian settings. The attractive, young males in the photographs have a casual informality about them, with jackets flung over their shoulders, or their feet up on the table of a roadside terrace, that are vaguely resonant of American styles of public behavior. The over-all impression is summarily captured in the advertisements' affirmative statement: "La liberté, toujours." Peter Stuyvesant cigarettes in the Netherlands used a more post-modern collage technique for conveying a similar message. They reduced the explicit markers of European dreams of America as open space, so central to the Marlboro approach, to mere echoes to trigger the same repertoire of fantasies. They showed young couples in the gathering places of an international leisure class, captioned in each case by the names of a hotel in Miami Beach, San Francisco, or other such places of rendez-vous. The central slogan, giving meaning to the jumble of text and visuals, reads: There are no borders. The advertising campaign was set up by a Dutch advertising agency as further testimony to the adoption by Europeans of American dreams and messages of unbounded space. The use of English in a campaign addressing a Dutch audience is increasingly common, and intended to give an international flavor to the message. Indeed, there are no borders.

In fact the commodified lure of open space has by now become so familiar that advertisers have begun to ironize their messages with an implied wink to an audience of initiates. One example of such an ironic twist is a commercial for an Italian travel agency, calling itself Marlboro Country Travels. Playing on the escapism of much modern tourism, where you have to lose yourself in the hope of finding yourself, it arranges travel to the United States while casting the destination in the image of Marlboro Country's fictional space. A large color photograph, actually a montage, shows a 1950s gas pump, a nostalgic reminder of the romanticism of Route 66 ("Get your kicks on Route 66"), of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, or the exhilaration of road movies. As a backdrop the photograph offers a view of the American West, with a little cloud of dust at its center trailing a diminutive SUV rolling off into the distance. The central slogan tells us: "Fa il vuoto." ("Go for the void"). It plays on the standard request at gas stations "to fill'er up" ("Fa il pieno"). It beautifully captures the desire of modern travelers to empty themselves of their concerns and pre-occupations, to leave all their worries behind and take off into empty space.

A similar punning approach to advertising can be found all over Europe's public space nowadays. Freedom still is the central idea in these games, although it is given many ironic twists. There was a poster for Levi's 508 jeans, pasted all over the Netherlands in the mid-1990s.¹ The photograph showed a male torso, naked from the neck down to the pair of blue jeans. The iconography has a high degree of intertextuality, at least to an audience steeped in American mass culture. It is reminiscent of Bruce Springsteen's cover for his album "Born in the USA," or of Andy Warhol's cover design for the Rolling Stones album "Sticky Fingers." Again, the poster uses a collage technique, offering a jumble of visual and textual ingredients. Surprisingly, given that this was an advertisement designed by a Dutch agency, in the lower left-hand corner we see a variation on Roosevelt's famous four freedoms. The first two sound pretty Rooseveltian, evoking the Freedoms of Speech and Expression, followed by the Freedom of Choice (not among Roosevelt's four—some, and sitting ambivalently astride the freedom of choice of people seen either as political citizens or as individual consumers). In fourth place, following the words Levi's 508 in boldface, is the Freedom of Movement. Again there is the political ring, expressive of a political longing that many in Eastern Europe may have felt during the years of the Cold War. Yet a pun is intended. The freedom of movement in this context is meant to refer to the greater movement offered by the baggier cut of the 508, a point visually illustrated by the unmistakable bulge of a male member in full erection, touched casually at the tip by the right hand of its master.

The list of further examples is endless. Advertising across Europe's public space has assumed common forms of address, common routines, and common themes (with many variations). Originating in America, it has now been appropriated by European advertising agencies and may be put in the service of American as well as European products. That in itself is a sign of a transnational integration of Europe's public space. But as I suggested before, the point of many of the stories advertisements tell refers precisely to space, to openness, to a dreamscape transcending Europe's checkered map. An international commercial culture has laid itself across public space in Europe, using an international language, often literally in snippets of English, and instilling cravings and desires now shared internationally. Has all this gone on without voices of protest and resistance rising in these same public spaces?

¹ I would like to thank Kate Delaney for calling this poster to my attention one rainy night in Amsterdam.

In fact there are many instances of such contestation, turning Europe's public space into yet another showcase of liminal Europes. Right at the heart of Europe, in its public space, we can see battle lines running as so many indications of groups pitting themselves against *forces of globalization and its appropriation*. If appropriation, however playfully and creatively done, is a form of acceptance, we can see many signs of rejection at the same time. On a highway outside Warsaw I saw a poster for ladies' lingerie, using the familiar techniques of drawing the spectator's gaze. It used the female body, shown here from the back, in reference (if not deference) to international ideals of female beauty. If such pictures are apt to draw the male gaze, they do so indirectly, through the male gaze as internalized by women. This is what they would like to look like in the eyes of men. The poster further used the appeal of English. The brand of lingerie was called "Italian Fashion," throwing in the appeal of Italian fashion design for good measure. But evidently, such public display of the female body was not to everyone's taste in Poland. Someone had gotten out his or her spraycan to write the Polish word "Dosc" (meaning "enough" or "stop it") across the poster. If a he, he may have been a devout Catholic protesting against the desecration of public space, if a she, she may have been a feminist, objecting to the commodification of the female body. In another instance, in the Northern Italian city of Turin, my gaze was drawn to the base of an equestrian statue. On all four sides, another spraycan artist had left these public messages: McDonald bastardi, Boycotta McDonald, and more such. If the square had been turned into a liminal Europe, with Europeans putting up resistance at what they saw as foreign encroachments, it happened in a rather ironic, if not self-defeating way. If the point of the protest was to rise in defense of the European cultural heritage, it did not shrink from turning one emblem of that heritage, an equestrian statue, into a mere blackboard for messages of protest, desecrating what it meant to elevate.

In Europe's lasting encounter with American mass culture, many have been the voices expressing concern about its negative impact. Cultural guardians in Europe saw European standards of taste and cultural appreciation eroded by an American way with culture that aimed at a mass market, elevating the lowest common denominator of mass preferences to the main vector of cultural production. This history of cultural anti-Americanism in Europe has a long pedigree. In its earlier manifestations the critique of American mass culture was highly explicit and had to be. Many ominous trends of an evolving mass culture in Europe had to be shown to have originated in America, reaching Europe under clear

American agency. An intellectual repertoire of Americanism and Americanization evolved in a continuing attempt at cultural resistance against the lures of a culture of consumption. Never mind that such cultural forms might have come to Europe autonomously, even in the absence of an American model. America served to give a name and a face to forces of cultural change that would otherwise have been anonymous and seemingly beyond control.

Today this European repertoire is alive and kicking. Yet, ironically, as a repertoire that has become common currency to the point of being an intellectual stereotype rather than an informed opinion, America nowadays is often a subtext, unspoken in European forms of cultural resistance. A recent example may serve to illustrate this. A political poster for the Socialist Party in Salzburg, in the run-up to municipal elections in the city, shows us the determined face and the clenched fist of the party's candidate. He asked the voting public whether the younger generation would not be losers, and called on the electorate to "fight, fight, and fight." What for? "In order to avoid that young people would get fed up with the future." ("Damit unsere Jugend die Zukunft nicht satt wird.") In a visual pun, at the poster's dead center, the getting fed up is illustrated by the blurred image of a Hamburger flying by at high speed. Fast food indeed. The call for action is now clear. Austrians should try and fend off a future cast in an American vein. American culture is condensed into the single image of the Hamburger, as a culture centered on consumption rather than consummation. It is enough to trigger the larger repertoire of cultural anti-Americanism.

We may choose to see this poster as only a recent version of cultural guardianship that has always looked at the younger generation as a stalking horse, if not a Trojan horse, for American culture. In fact, historically, it has always been younger generations who, in rebellion against parental authority and cultural imposition, opted for the liberating potential of American mass culture. Yet interesting changes may have occurred in this pattern. Today young people as well, in their concern about forces of globalization, may target America as the central agency behind these global trends. They may smash the windows of a nearby McDonald's (and there is always a McDonald's nearby), they may deface equestrian statues in Turin, or may choose more creative and subtle forms of protest. Yet again America tends to be a mere subtext in their resistance against global cultural icons.

One more example may serve to illustrate this. I have a music video, a few years old, of a Basque group. The video, in its own right, is an act of cultural emancipation. The lyrics are in the Basque language and the

station broadcasting the video had all-Basque programming. This may suggest localism, if not cultural provincialism. Nothing would be farther from the truth. What we have here is a perfect example of "glocalisation", to use Roland Robertson's neologism.² The music used is ska, an ingredient of "world music" hailing from the Caribbean and popularized through the British music industry. The format of the music video itself is part of global musical entertainment. Yet the message is local. What the video shows is a confusing blend of the traditional and the modern. The opening shot is of a man using a scythe to cut grass. The camera moves up and shows a modern, international-style, office block. A mobile phone rings, and the grasscutter answers the call. More images show modern life. We see an old man talking into a microphone strapped to his head, as if he were talking to himself. We see a group of young men on a flatbed lorry moving through traffic. They are working out in tandem on treadmill machines, yet in complete isolation, like a transported glimpse of an American gym. Then the protagonists of the video appear, with a rickety van, getting ready to sell the local variety of Basque fast food, a sausage on a roll. The very smell breaks the isolation of people caught in the alienating life of modernity. They all flock to the sausage stand to get a taste of true Basqueness. They come to life, spurred by an alleged authenticity of traditional Basque life. The lyrics repeat the refrain: Down with Big Mac, Long live (follows the name of the Basque delicacy).

The claim made in this video is on behalf of the authenticity of regional cultures struggling to survive in a world threatened by the homogenizing forces of globalization. Yet the medium of communication testifies to the impact of precisely those forces as much as it protests against them. There is much irony in all this, but most important is the fact that what is shown as modernity truly revives a long repertoire of European cultural anti-Americanism. America *is* modernity and the long history of European resistance to America is truly a story of resisting the onslaught of modernity on Europe's checkered map of regional and/or national cultures.

To watch this ambiguous proclamation of a regional culture's superiority and authenticity is to be reminded again of the irony of life in today's many liminal Europes, literally at the *limes*, the edge, of Europe's cultural sway. As one visit to Bilbao, the industrial city in the Basque country, will make clear, the Basqueness of the place is, if anything, an imposed and unduly homogenized reading. Under the impact

² R. Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?" *The Journal of International Communication*, I, 1, 1994.

of industrialization Bilbao, like so many other industrial centers, has drawn its work force from a large hinterland, forgetful of the integrity of local culture. If capitalism, as Joseph Schumpeter reminded us long ago, is a force of creative destruction, Bilbao testifies to the truth of this statement. People from all over Spain have migrated there and lived there for several generations, giving the place a multi-cultural tone, and eroding Basqueness from within its own territory. Following years of decline, the city has now revived. In addition to restoring its heritage of a residential and industrial architecture redolent of its past prowess, it also sought to reconnect itself to the contemporary modernity of cutting-edge architecture. By the river that runs through the city now stands one of Europe's great modern structures, a museum of art designed by the American architect Frank Gehry, and financed by Guggenheim money. With its wavy lines it evokes a local seafaring history and seems to mirror the river that connected Bilbao to the wider world. It is a modern rendition of a local history that lives on as collective memory. It seems to have sprouted from that store of memories, much as the creative genius who shaped it lives across the ocean's waters that wash the Basque coast at their eastern reach. If Bilbao seeks to reconnect itself to a cosmopolitanism it once reflected, its strivings stand at right angles to the efforts at freezing Basqueness in time. Whatever the peculiarities of this tension, its inherent logic makes Bilbao a microcosm of Europe's many internal contradictions.