

A POSTCOLONIAL VIEW OF EUROPEAN OCCIDENTALISM*

Walter Hölbling

In this somewhat unconventional book with its punning title Rob Kroes, well-published Dutch scholar and former president of the European Association of American Studies, presents what at first sight appear to be nine rather loosely connected essays of cultural criticism in the post-colonial vein on highly diverse topics. According to the author, his cross-sampling discussion has been inspired by the research of a group of international scholars at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the academic year 1991-92; the subject of their research was the Janus-faced structures of the patterns of reception and rejection of American mass culture in Europe. Kroes' focus is on the processes of Americanization in terms of its mediation and transformation in Europe, with emphasis on the metaphorical qualities of Europeans' imaginary Americas. In his introduction, Kroes isolates three major metaphorical repertoires commonly used in European constructions of America: the first is based on spatial metaphors and sees America, in contrast to Europe, as flat and flattening, subject to forces that tend to level the verticality of European life, with its sense of cultural and social hierarchy; the second repertoire draws on temporal metaphors and portrays America as lacking a European sense of history that makes the past a critical ingredient in the makeup of the present; the third repertoire is built upon notions of America as lacking the European sense of organic cohesion and integrity and sees America as a country "of blithe bricolage, irreverently taking apart and recombining at will what to Europeans appears in the light of wholeness, if not holiness. (xiii)" According to Kroes, these three clusters of discourse comprise the rhetoric of European "occidentalism" that has, with astounding historical stability, determined European metaphorical constructs of America over the centuries; the subsequent chapters illustrate this point and discuss the manifestations, modifications and spin-offs of these concepts in various areas of American mass culture.

The first chapter, "American Culture in European Metaphors", elaborates on these introductory thoughts in more detail and with reference to European cultural critics like Oswald Spengler, George Duhamel, Ortega y Gasset, Johan Huizinga and Menno ter Braak, and points to another important European image of America as the 'empty' continent, the *tabula rasa*, the void to be filled with the European (projections of) ideal/new/liberated societies and their various social and historical concepts. We are also reminded of the fact that *American* as opposed to *European*, from the very beginning, has always implied a contrastive comparison that dwells on the presence/absence of qualities in the world of the respective 'Other'. The major themes here are

aspects of the horizontal flattening vs. vertical hierarchies, lack of (temporal and spatial) cohesion, and (with reference to Umberto Eco's dictum of America as "the last beach of European culture") American culture as a gigantic beachcomber that collects, reassembles, replicates and incorporates the crumbling residues of European cultural driftwood. Very appropriately, the chapter closes with a quotation from Jacques Derrida: "L'Amérique, mais *c'est* la déconstruction!"

Chapter 2, "High and Low. The Quest for Cultural Standards in America", first critically comments on narrow European stereotypes of American superficiality and then goes on to approach its subject obliquely from two angles. First, it focuses on the discussion of nationalist vs. cosmopolitan standards of art and culture as manifested in the few issues of *The Seven Arts* in 1916/17 and the intellectuals associated with it, e. g. the young Van Wyck Brooks, James Oppenheimer, Waldo Frank, Walter Weyl, Walter Lippmann, and Randolph Bourne, who in the encompassing democratic tradition of Walt Whitman considered the influx of immigrants and the ideas and concepts they brought along as an indispensable contribution to the building of an America conceived as "a family of nations". The second focus is on the development of photography as a genuinely American and democratic art form which, however, was mostly ignored by the more elitist and idealist minded group around *The Seven Arts*. The achievements of photographers like Alfred Stieglitz, Clarence White, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, or Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Arnold Genthe have only recently received due attention as representatives of an intellectual avant-garde who not only documented social –especially immigrant– life but also experimented with collage, the combination of image and text, and with that "disassembling mental mode" of presentation which Kroes considers characteristically American and which he sees more fully developed in the social documentary photographs of the 1930s, especially in the works of Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, or Dorothea Lange. As it is, this chapter contributes only a few explicit comments to the general theme of the book, yet its focus on the contributions of immigrants to American culture and society, as well as its perceptive discussion of diverging intellectual and artistic movements establish additional points of reference (and différance?) for major elements of American mass culture.

Chapter 3, "Film as a Mechanical Art. Hollywood and Holland", opens with a discussion of the status of film as art in the context of the debate about the mechanization and standardization of art raging in Europe and America in the early 20th century. For many European thinkers –Kroes mentions Huizinga, Duhamel, André Siegfried, Adolf Halfeld, Richard Mueller-Freienfels, and Hermann Keyserling– 'Fordism' and its concomitant suggestive connotations of industrialized mass society as a machine producing mechanized and exchangeable masses of consumers represented the most un-European (and, implicitly, the most dehumanizing) aspect of contemporary America. What is left unmentioned in this discussion, though, is the fact that the machine-metaphor had become quite popular both in Europe and in the USA around the end of the 19th century and had, for many writers and intellectuals on both continents, found its most devastating manifestation in the mechanized mass slaughter of World War I (*vide* Kafka, Remarque, Céline, Dos Passos, Cummings, Hemingway, etc.).

The remaining major part of this chapter is given to a discussion of the new (American) medium of film in Holland, where the debate about its merits split confessional groups as well as artists into opposing camps that occasionally formed strange alliances in the pursuit of their various goals. Several quizzical comments suggest

that Kroes perceives more than occasional affinities between the situation in Holland and that in the rest of Europe.

In chapter 4, "Advertising. The World of Disjointed Attributes", Kroes relates his concept of the "erosive, modularizing approach of Americans toward cultural forms in general" to the more or less artful appropriation of central images of the American Dream (space, freedom, individual fulfillment, Westward Ho!, etc.) by the advertising industry and the concomitant commodification of values and desires of a booming consumer market. The discussion of creative advertising iconography is highly perceptive and to the point; acknowledging a mutually inspiring influence between art and commerce, Kroes also points to the fact that commerce and advertising have created easily consumable simulacra of American reality while leaving historical reality behind. The concluding example, taken from the author's visit to the town of Holland, Michigan, aptly illustrates the argument and contextualizes the chapter squarely within the book's general theme: while the shops on Main Street in Holland, Michigan, are obviously languishing and the streets are almost empty, the shopping mall outside town, done in fake Dutch architecture and complete with windmill, waitresses in vaguely Dutch folklore costumes, etc. is booming with the happily consuming inhabitants of the deserted town.

Simulacra and the illusion of reality created by technology are also the concern of the following chapter, titled "The Fifth Freedom and the Commodification of Virtue." Starting out with F. D. Roosevelt's famous "Four Freedoms" as articulated in his 1941 State of the Union Address, Kroes points to the inextricable structural affinities between free economics and free (= democratic) government, and discusses examples from the 1920s to the present of how commercial goods as well as political ideas have to be 'sold' convincingly in order to be successful. The Fifth Freedom, that of choice (originally of free trade and then incorporated into Roosevelt's foursome), was soon taken up by the advertising industry which, especially since the advent of television, has managed to create an infinite number of images to sell products that suggest consumer gratification through acquisition of the two fundamental ingredients of the American Dream: freedom and affluence. (Not so incidentally, the fifth freedom also seems to have inspired the current campaign of meta-commercials in Europe as well as the U. S. that propagate the right of consumers to be offered a choice of products – thanks to the efforts of the advertising industry.)

In one of the many highly perceptive passages in this book, Kroes argues that it is exactly the political echoes of both "freedom of choice" and the "choice of freedom" that have bestowed on many U.S. products their semiotic load of subversiveness and cultural rebellion, and have turned them into free-floating signifiers of a global *lingua franca* whose use can no longer be dictated solely from America but is open to free creolization by other cultures: E.g., if youths in China or Nigeria sport T-shirts with the names of *Coca Cola*, *New York Giants*, or *Harley-Davidson*, they are not (primarily, one might add) advertising commercial brands but making a cultural, social and political statement, as they do with listening to rock music, hip-hop, or rap.

Very aptly, the author in this context takes the opportunity to question the double standards often applied by awowed (European) critics of 'American' mass culture: while advocates of 'high' culture usually propagate cosmopolitanism in order to overcome narrow provincial tastes, in their eyes the international character of mass, or pop, culture threatens indigenous cultural identities. Kroes furnishes a good number of examples for this as well as for his concluding argument in this chapter that Euro-

peans, in their use of U.S.-generated icons, often go far beyond the American limits of taste and decency.

In chapter 6, “Mediated History: The Vietnam War as a Media Event”, the author applies his instrumentarium for the analysis of technically generated realities and icons to the media coverage as well as to documentary and feature films coming out of the Vietnam War. In particular, Kroes discusses the still often voiced thesis that the U.S. lost the war because of television’s impact on the home front, as well as Jean Baudrillard’s statement that America is still busy winning the war on the movie screen all over the world. As to the first, Kroes voices his skepticism and argues convincingly that, though television coverage of the war itself and of the anti-war events at home was certainly abundant, the overall impact of that information –split up into audiovisual bites between commercials, as most newscasting in the U.S.– most likely was not stronger than during any other war and did not necessarily influence the viewers’ attitudes exclusively *against* the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

With regard to Baudrillard’s statement, Kroes partly agrees that the sheer number of U.S. –generated imaginative presentations of the Vietnam War has an impact on our collective imagination and memory. Yet he also points to the fact that not only is there a good number of American movies about Vietnam that present the war from a highly critical perspective (mentioned are *Apocalypse Now*; *Good Morning, Vietnam*; *The Deerhunter*; *Birdie*), but also that even icons like Rambo, who are highly determined for an American audience, can be turned to pacifist use in other cultures.

The two short chapters 7 and 8, “Breathless. The French *Nouvelle Vague* and Hollywood” and “Rap. The Ultimate Staccato Culture”, deal with the ambiguous relationship of French movie-makers to Hollywood productions, and with Rap as a recent phenomenon of *vernacular* or *street culture*, respectively. In the field of film, the French *cinéphiles* of the late 1940s and early 1950s became fascinated by Hollywood *auteur* movies and, when they had become movie-makers themselves, like François Truffaut or Jean Luc Goddard, employed the techniques and icons of American movies for their own critique of American culture and its products, as Truffaut did in *La nuit américaine*, or Goddard in *A bout de souffle*.

The discussion of Rap in chap. 8 is preceded by something one might, if only for systematic reasons, have expected in chapter 1 –a definition of the terms *mass culture*, *popular culture*, and *vernacular* or *street culture* as used in this book. Not that it would have made a great difference: neither the definition of *mass culture* “as applying to all those forms of culture that reach a large audience and that, for the production and distribution, depend on techniques of mechanical reproduction and on modern means of mass communication,” nor that of *popular culture* as “a sensitizing concept” reminding us that phenomena of mass culture have their origins in local/regional social and cultural groups, significantly influence our understanding of the book’s lines of argument. Rap, in the ensuing discussion, is seen as originating in regional/local *street culture* and then being absorbed by international mass culture for its capacity to re-assemble the daily information overflow of U.S. consumer and information society into new patterns– for Kroes another example of the general tendency of American mass culture to deconstruct and re-form established structures.

The final chapter, “Americanization. What are we Talking About?”, makes a valiant attempt to synthesize the eclectic arguments and arrive at a tentative conclusion. In his résumé, Kroes emphasizes again that “America” has always been a hybrid between European (intellectuals’) projections and actual historical developments in the

U.S.A., and that European statements about ‘Americanization’ –critical or affirmative– have a tendency to ignore this dimension. With reference to the cultural anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, Kroes considers Europe to be at the periphery of America as today’s global cultural center, a reversal of roles since the times when the U.S.A. (and much of the rest of the world) were at the receiving end of European (cultural) politics; what we receive are, in fact, very often transformed products of what Europeans have exported to this American culture, though in many instances the freedom from traditional conceptual frameworks may have transformed the original beyond (immediate) recognition. In a turn of phrase that somehow sounds a little bit like whistling in the dark, the author argues that, in spite of Europe’s current peripheral position, fears of ‘Americanization’ are as unfounded and irrational as ever: the process of *creolization* (a term borrowed from linguistics and adopted by cultural anthropologists and critics) as evident in the diverse selective appropriations of American mass culture all over the world, demonstrates that ‘Americanization’ is never a one-way street.

Left with this concluding statement, a more theoretically inclined reader might wish that Kroes had developed more elaborately his argument about the initial creolization of European culture by Americans and the recent process of Europeans creolizing American (as it is, pre-creolized) mass culture. Yet the strength of this book lies not so much in bending the variety of mass-cultural phenomena to fit a unifying cultural (post- or neo-colonial) theory, but rather in the awareness and the documentation of the highly interactive and dynamic impact of American mass culture on Europe and the rest of the world. Kroes’ numerous examples of the intricate processes of creative as well as mutual European-American creolizations convincingly demonstrate that –in today’s global information and communication society more than ever before– notions of national, regional, or ethnic cultural ‘purity’, are but simplistic *panaceae*.

* Kroes, Rob. *If You’ve Seen One, You’ve Seen the Mall. Europeans and American Mass Culture*. Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1996. pp. 195.