

America From Across the Atlantic

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The decision to go abroad, which I made after graduating from college in 2003, often represents an embrace of the challenges and pleasures of the unfamiliar. This reorientation is also a form of *disorientation*, for the new that floods in from all sides pulls old assumptions off their moorings. Just as a compelling theory may force students to fall back on what they know, only to find that the theory has changed the way in which they consider this knowledge, so the experience of living on a foreign continent makes one both look homeward and realize that home will never be the same. The lesson I learned during my year and a half as an expatriate is perhaps best described as a semantic one: *home*, *United States*, and *America* ceased forever to be synonyms in my mind.

Even if home still lies “over there,” certain signs of it greet the eyes of Americans abroad no matter where we go. More than any other country, the United States extends beyond its borders; its extensive global permeations have reshaped foreign economic, political, and social, not to mention imaginative landscapes—all in the image of America. If this is a form of visual manipulation, however, it is one that stops well short of mimesis. The American abroad sees that these reshaped foreign landscapes are no more mirror images of home than the United States—a 228 year-old political entity with physical borders, all the more real as a result of post-9/11 immigration policy—is a mirror image of “America,” a global idea fusing modern realities with the dreams, fantasies, and satellite image-fed visions of everyone from America’s original European colonizers, to Lewis and Clark, to Somali refugees, to the likes of al-Qaeda. It is an idea that has traditionally resisted borders; in the era of mass communication, it no longer knows them.

The Atlantic Ocean was the first to evaporate. As a result, Europe and America are in a mature relationship—or, if that sounds too rosy, an advanced stage of conflict. At the end of World War II, the US gave a recovering Europe not only economic aid and security guarantees, but also daily injections of American culture, something the continent has hardly flushed out of its bloodstream. On the other hand, as any backpacker will tell you, there still exist plenty of cultural reminders that “Europe is different”. It should be no surprise, then, that their idea of America is too. The first impulse of a proud US citizen, even one who embraces Europe’s difference, may be to reject this idea of America as a *false* one, a deformed twin bred of ignorant or incompetent non-Americans who “just don’t get it.” We Americans should, however, be critically engaging their version of America, rather than dismissing it. This is the first step towards understanding The United States of America as not one, but two things: “The United States” and “America”. Our founding fathers basically took care of the first one; but a quest for the second needs to be undertaken today. It could well begin in the cafés, classrooms, and living rooms of Europe.

Despite all the hours I spent in exactly those places, it took me a long time to separate myself from the USA., and the USA. into two distinct concepts. After finishing college in May 2003, I spent the summer working at an international summer camp in Switzerland; in September I started teaching English and French at a private Greek school in Athens, where I played in a local soccer league and explored this city’s biggest

boon—its night life—with Athenian friends on weekends. I used my vacation time to travel around provincial Greece and the rest of Europe, trying my best to plug in to the people and the culture of wherever I happened to be. My major goal in going abroad had been to make myself a European, and hence more worldly, citizen, detached from my American roots. After the first six months or so, two things had happened. The first was good: Despite dogged efforts, I hadn't "become European" (I would have saved myself a lot of trouble, I realized, if only I'd paid attention to the cloud of facetiousness and anachronism surrounding that very phrase, not to mention all the stories by Henry James). The second, in my opinion, was not so good: I had become even more attached to my US roots, to the point of possessiveness. As much as I loved Europe, I started to think that it could contribute little to my idea of myself, and even less to my idea of America.

Contrasting America with Europe—a totalizing term that I recognize as problematic, but use loosely to refer to the western European members of the EU, including Greece and the UK—is unoriginal at this point. James has done it better than I, for one, ever will. But it is also, ultimately, less fruitful than a repositioning of the relationship between the two—indeed, a redefinition of terms. "America," particularly in the global age, should be thought of neither as simply a place, nor as a permanent set of values, beliefs, attitudes, or philosophies. It is an idea, one that is fluid and open to constant change, and not defined by traditional constraints like geography, politics, and nationality. My personal experience, however, showed me that thinking of America in these terms is easier said than done.

I'm American, plain and simple

The closing of my American mind wasn't entirely *my* fault, per se. In many ways, the age-old division between the two continents sits just as firmly in European minds as it does in ours. Looking beyond this divide actually got harder for me when I was Europe. People began asking me to talk about the US—something which not only made it difficult for me to shed my national identity, but also encouraged an "I know America, they don't" attitude. My primary responsibility at Athens College was to teach English. I taught short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Ray Bradbury, designed a unit on American poetry, and spent almost an entire semester force-feeding the *American Beauty* screenplay to high school seniors. According to my job description, though, I was not only a teacher but also a "cultural ambassador" to the Hellenic American Educational Foundation. As such, I gave presentations about Thanksgiving and the American Revolution to the entire school, and routinely answered the questions high school students asked me about universities in the States (which I started to believe we limited to the Ivy League, MIT, and "schools in California"). The fourteen-year-old boy I tutored three days a week and who claimed to hate all things American insisted that I tell him about summer academic programs in the Boston area. Every week I met Mr. and Mrs. Bouras, an older Greek couple, for parlor chat, and the year they spent in Cincinnati a few decades ago was a popular topic of conversation. After I briefed them on the Democratic candidates competing in the primaries, they made me their authority on Election 2004.

Although interesting, the views of my country I found in the European media hardly made me feel less American. Even though I could get the *New York Times* online every morning, I decided to give priority to European newspapers as part of my

immersion process. In fact this move had the opposite effect: the European media made me defensive, as if strangers were talking about me behind my back. I told myself, if I wanted criticism of the US government, I could find better, more informed arguments in our own media. Furthermore, while the European media's oblique angles of approach sometimes lead to fresh discussions of American politics, culture, or ways of thinking, I was more likely to conclude that they terminated in *cul-de-sacs* of irrelevance. To use one extreme example: when I was in Rome, I picked up an Italian magazine whose cover story on John Kerry gushed about all the time he'd spent in Europe, and his connection with JFK, including the delightful coincidence that the two men share the same initials. In addition to making me feel like a real political insider (something I would have only called myself in college to amuse my friends), this article joined others as perfect evidence that Europe couldn't contribute to any useful discussion of America.

Speaking of American Pop Icons (and European Worshippers)...

For European youth, however, a lot of discussions are likely to be drowned out by the Surround Sound blast of Hollywood movies and pop music. They would prefer to skip school and go to the movies just as much as we would. By now it's old news that the most pervasive (and persuasive), not to mention most attractive disseminator of our country's global "empire" is the glam coalition led by Britney, Beyoncé, and Brad Pitt. Even when a real dud like *Bad Boyz II* opened at the Cineplex down the street—called Village Center, which sounds funny in a Greek accent—it was no use trying to get tickets until the weekend was over. At the camp in Switzerland where I worked, any twelve-year-old boy who could rap Eminem was cool, and all the girls had Justin Timberlake's dance routine from the "Rock Your Body" video memorized.

Now, I wanted to conclude from this that we are really all in the same boat. However, it was hard to ignore the fact that Europeans by the millions are watching Hollywood movies, while my local video rental store is being audacious if it allots more than two shelves for "Foreign Films" from everywhere from France to Hong Kong. In music, European youth is familiar with just about every major American pop act from Mariah Carey to metal bands like Nickelback and Linkin Park. On the other hand, I, along with most of my American co-workers at the Swiss camp, did not know of Robbie Williams, a British singer who's quite used to being one of the hottest stars on the continent, until we started hearing him everywhere that summer. The US provides pop, while Europe consumes; any inversion of this relationship is usually the result of a freak accident. Take the Spice Girls, for example.

I was surprised to find Europe encouraging me to trade in Bach for Britney. As an undergrad, I felt comfortable referring to the Flavor-of-the-Month as the scum of the airwaves. But in Europe, where I was dedicated to going *with* the flow—more accurately, to being swept up in the wave of mainstream European culture—I quickly discovered that L.A. and New York govern the tides; being a complete snob would have been much more alienating than being your average consumer of American pop. As it turned out, though, I had my cake and ate it too, turning my nose up at every embarrassing attempt the Europeans made to copy our superior craftsmanship and design. Seeing so many poor imitations led me to a genuine appreciation for the talents of Christina Aguilera, Jerry Bruckheimer, and even, I am ashamed to say, the "Friends" screenwriters: in fact, all those culture creators in the US who possess both a sense of what the world's younger

half likes and a knack for turning it out—and that includes the masterminds behind reality TV, which I assure you is more abominable overseas. Admittedly, living in Greece, I took more pride in the best of mainstream American culture than I would in, say, Britain—which, in addition to its output of good pop music, also broadcasts its distinct sense of humor with shows like “The Office”—or France, whose black Francophone community, in my opinion, sometimes does hip-hop just as well as its flashier brothers across the Atlantic.

In Greece, on the other hand, a blatant rip-off of “In da Club” (American rapper 50 Cent’s breakthrough single) topped the charts for months. The video clip is not only an exercise in the kind of posing that one generally outgrows after high school, but also replete with product placements so heavy-handed that even my Athenian friends couldn’t take it seriously. MAD, the Greek version of MTV, would offer these music videos between long segments filmed within the advertisement-studded walls of its own studio. These videos usually feature a cute girl on a sofa reading crib notes while the cameraman intensified things with fast zooms and “crazy” camera angles achieved through physical acrobatics. Most Americans are familiar with this kind of presentation in parody form. *Wayne’s World*, anyone?

For a time, my experience in Europe, not exactly a humbling one, led me to consider myself an expert on American literature, history, politics, and, most resoundingly, a confident judge of good and bad pop culture—the former belonging largely to the US, the latter to inept foreign imitators. I lied before; it’s clear that after college, I simply swapped one form of snobbery for another. The attitude I developed is not only fatuous but dangerous, and ultimately, it is counterproductive. It encourages a creeping chauvinism because it assumes that Europe must either “get America” right, wrong, or not at all. The truth of the matter is, firstly, that Europeans get America in their own way, and this is fine, because the global idea called “America” is not a FedEx package. There is no America to get. There is an America to create. Europe is not just a big cultural copy room. It is, rather, the studio and exhibition space for a collage-like assemblage of imaginative responses the US generates from outside its own borders. It is one of many places where America, the global idea, is born and reborn on a daily basis.

An Expanded Idea of America

Today it’s difficult *not* to get information about the US, and it should be of interest to Americans to see how a non-American who has never visited their country perceives it.

—Lars von Trier, interviewed in *Sight and Sound* magazine (2003)

In 2000, Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier made *Dancer in the Dark*, a film about a Czech immigrant in America named Selma whose passion for Hollywood musicals provides an escape from appalling misfortune. Interviewed in the British film periodical *Sight and Sound*, von Trier said that many critics complained that his grim melodrama, which takes place in the Eisenhower era, didn’t get America right. J. Hoberman of the *Village Voice*, for example, accused von Trier of setting the film in “an imaginary

America that...is far closer to the invented USA of Soviet propaganda films.” But while verisimilitude can, of course, sometimes make or break a work of art, it would be a mistake for us to simply dismiss von Trier’s “imaginary America” as bogus and move on.

Crude as they may seem, those low-grade imitations of American pop are local expressions in a borrowed language. This is literally the case—the language being not English, but hip-hop—in “To Gucci Forema” (“The Gucci Dress”), that Greek rap I mentioned earlier, whose catchy beat is lifted wholesale from 50 Cent. The song describes a case of class differences squelching a love affair, as a rich Athenian girl dumps a hip-hop artist with a ghetto background (emboldened by DeWar’s Scotch whiskey, he lights the symbolic garment on fire at the end of the video). And it’s not all bad art: an American friend of mine liked the Greek lyrics so much that she decided to learn them by heart.

This essay is not about politics or ideology. It is, however, about the interaction of cultures, and so it is relevant to point out that in the theater of international diplomacy, the actual sum of our political attitudes, our national interests, and the role we intend to play in foreign affairs, is less important for many Europeans than what they perceive it to be. Its ideology aside, one might justifiably accuse the Bush White House of being a casting agency specializing in the kinds of stock characters on which Europeans base their American stereotypes. Michael Lind, a Texan journalist who has written extensively about George W. Bush, has described our president’s way of thinking as a “traditional Lone Star mentality”—a mentality much less relevant to this essay than Bush’s stubborn insistence on playing the part of a cowboy. Here is a man who has alluded to “Wanted: Dead or Alive” posters in Texas while publicly discussing the search for Osama Bin-Laden. Again, ideology and politics are not the issue here—images are. In the quest to broaden, rather than narrow, the world’s definition of “America,” playbacks of tired clichés will only take us backwards. One reason so many European observers, particularly young ones, opposed the Iraq invasion had nothing to do with politics: they’d been expecting to see diplomacy, but all they got was a bad genre film. The talks I had with Europeans my age confirmed this.

Obviously, the opposition to Bush isn’t as widespread here as it is in Europe (indeed, “smoking out” our enemies struck a popular national chord), but many Americans, whether they support the president’s policies or not, remain, to say the least, uncomfortable with him. Bush gives many of us the creeping suspicion that as his televised statements are being syndicated around the planet, we are being pigeonholed. This is unfortunate, but it also bears an important reminder: the world is watching the same broadcasts we are. We therefore need to consider that when a Spanish university student, an artist like Lars von Trier, or a German plumber imagines “America,” he doesn’t simply embark on a flight of fancy; he builds an idea from the thick heap of materials—images, information, travel, and other impressions, including, in some cases, contact with visiting “ambassadors” like me—culled from his everyday experience. The theorists I read in college refer to this process of imaginative assembly as *bricolage*. I doubt too many of them tuned in to Top 40 or ate Happy Meals, but then again, the average German plumber probably doesn’t either. This does not mean he doesn’t participate in the creation of America.

In the end, it is impossible to avoid looking for differences between the US and Europe. We will continue to think this way. But perhaps we can adopt a new line of

inquiry, asking why, for example, T.G.I. Friday's and Pizza Hut are tawdry conveniences in the States but the two trendiest restaurants in Kefalari, a chic suburb north of Athens. After my time in Europe, I've started to ask myself these questions and more, including a cute rhetorical one that sums up my experience nicely: In going abroad, one never really leaves America. But before one leaves it, does one ever really know America in the first place?