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Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

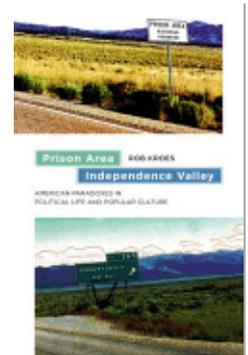
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COOL HAND LUCK: HOW AMERICA PLAYED ITS HAND ENTERTAINING THE WORLD

FOLLOWING THE ESTABLISHING shots of a bombed-out Berlin in Billy Wilder's classic film *A Foreign Affair* (1948), there is a telling vignette of life resuming its course amid the ruins of the city. It is a scene of a street market near the Brandenburg Gate, where goods change hands in what is basically a barter economy. At one point we see a Soviet soldier looking for a new wristwatch. The display counter, it turns out, are the arms of an American soldier. They are covered with watches that are revealed one by one as the American pulls up his sleeves. The Soviet customer is hard to please, until, at one point, his face lights up, and he shouts in joyful recognition: "Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse!" The watch with the face of Walt Disney's emblematic mouse has a new owner while triggering a store of happy childhood memories. The long slog of war all the way from the Russian heartland to Berlin has found its reward.

What are we to make of this fleeting moment? Wilder, with a delightfully light touch of cynicism, offers a morality play of naive, high-minded American idealism facing the reality check of life in a city where the dictates of survival make light of moral standards. In his brief cameo appearance, Mickey Mouse reminds us of some of the hidden strengths in the American arsenal of domination. Americans in the early years of their occupation

policies were groping for guidelines, feeling their way around in the uncharted terrain of foreign affairs. While engaging in the dirty compromises of “having a foreign affair,” unwittingly re-playing Jamesian encounters between American innocence and the wicked ways of Europe, they brought their own repertoires of seduction to bear.

Of course, in the early postwar years Mickey Mouse was just one among those disjointed snippets of American mass culture that had scattered across the globe in the first half of the century. They had not yet congealed into one coherent mass-cultural flood that would irresistibly wash across the globe, offering a consistent reading of “America” as an imaginary construct, the emblem of a country and a culture holding forth a vision of the “good life,” of an empire of consumption, or rather the emporium of a democracy of goods available to all. There was an implied message of democracy here, in the sense of a democracy of goods and pleasures, accessible to all and deeply affecting the sense of citizenship as an entitlement to consumerist participation.¹ In a process evolving over the postwar years, in all countries of Western Europe, the various disjointed snippets of a pleasurable American mass culture would undergo a semiotic shift, resulting in a perception of the various snippets as so many ingredients jointly constituting this larger enticing America. In a Europe of postwar scarcity America came to represent this tempting image of a plethora of goods. It did this through Hollywood movies, through the Marshall Plan, through advertising in the illustrated press—in other words, through a combination of commerce and cultural diplomacy. In the process “America” acquired its tempting aura. It turned into a brand, adding its seductive appeal to the separate items of consumption the United States exported. Thus a repertoire developed of American consumption goods, from blue jeans to kitchens, from cigarettes to cars, from films to music, vying for market share while crucially and at the same time performing an informal function of cultural diplomacy. They were all turned into cultural am-

bassadors evoking American dreams in the minds of foreign publics.

Mickey Mouse early on illustrated this cultural offensive. He could avail himself of all the mastery of American mass-cultural production and dissemination. Not only had he managed to create eager consumers in the United States and elsewhere, enjoying his antics in print and on screen, he also blithely underwent a process of merchandising, linking his appeal to consumer products such as wristwatches. The vignette in Billy Wilder's film illustrates this conjunction. It also illustrates the process through which America's popular cult figures ride piggybacking through the world, establishing semiotic outposts that would increasingly turn into bridgeheads for an imaginary America. It is a process of cultural conquest under the aegis of commercial market inroads. While gaining access to foreign markets, America's products doubled as agents of cultural penetration.

Two examples may suffice to make this more general point. They take us ahead in time to the post-Cold War era, right into the heart of former Soviet domain. While bordering on the space of a European Union casting about for meaningful emblems to signify its appeal to the populations of the former Soviet Union, icons of American popular culture, with all their semiotic radiance, had vaulted effortlessly across Europe to land ostentatiously in the midst of Eastern European space. Two photographs, taken in the Crimea in the late 1990s, testify to this cultural invasion. One graphically shows the confrontation between an emblem of the ancien régime, a statue of Lenin grimly sizing up the challenge posed by the golden arches of McDonald's. The other shows the presence of the Marlboro Man, Mr. Cool himself, in the characteristic repose of a Westerner who for a change has ventured east. If, in addition to his appeal to cigarette smokers, he tells a taller story, it is one—so to speak—of “How *the East Was Won*” (to paraphrase the title of an iconic 1962 Hollywood Western).

Both photographs are from the time when the semiotic shift that I mentioned had already taken place, when the individual



Lenin Meets McDonald's, Crimea, 2001. *Monique van Hoogstraten, Private Collection.*

bits of American popular culture had already found their place in the larger iconography of an imaginary America. Not only had McDonald's hamburgers and Marlboro cigarettes pried open markets for themselves, they had also irresistibly made way for the Americanization of popular tastes and individual dreams. They offered iconic heroes for people to identify with and to style their identities as their own free agents. Or at least such is the promise held out by American popular culture.

Of course this is a story that keeps repeating itself and has been the stuff of much study focusing on the general theme of the Americanization of the world. Had Jean-Paul Sartre been alive and seen the Marlboro Man in the Crimea, he would have been reminded of his brief infatuation with Western heroes that he had seen in Hollywood Westerns, as "Men of unreflective action," "men who thought little, spoke little and always did the right thing," men that to Sartre appeared like the prototype of the existentialist man, the embodiment of his existentialist ideas.² He



The Marlboro Man in the Crimea, 2001. *Monique van Hoogstraten, Private Collection.*

might have labeled them “cool,” had he been aware of the term. It was an image that must have come to Sartre while he watched Hollywood films, one of the powerful transmitters of American heroes and cultural icons. Sartre’s infatuation did not last. His critical left-wing views turned him away from admiring adoption of American cultural repertoires to a critical deconstruction of America as an imperialist power. The lure of Americanization was fended off by his later vehement anti-Americanism, cultural and political. His was an intellectual trajectory traveled by many intellectuals in Europe and elsewhere.

In Europe’s lasting encounter with American mass culture, many were the voices expressing a 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, crucially in the years following World War I, 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.³

Recent Trends: America as a Subtext

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. One 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 asks 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 hat.") 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 to fend off a future cast in an American vein. To make this point, American culture is condensed into the single image of the hamburger. It is enough to trigger the larger repertoire of cultural anti-Americanism.



Election poster, Salzburg. *Photograph by the author.*

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 the United States as the central agency behind these global trends. They may smash the windows of a nearby McDonald's or may choose more creative and subtle forms of protest. Yet again America tends to be the unspoken subtext in their resistance against global cultural icons.

One more example may serve to illustrate this point. Let me draw on a music video, "Big Beñat," by a Basque group, "Fermín Muguruza," released in the late 1990s. 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 has all-Basque programming. This may suggest localism, if not cultural

provincialism. Nothing would be further from the truth. What we have here is a perfect example of “glocalisation,” Roland Robertson’s neologism for the interplay between globalization and localization. The music used, Ska, is a staple 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 shows 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 grass-cutter answers the call. More images show modern life. We see an old man talking into a microphone strapped to his head, as if he is talking to himself. We see a group of young men working out in tandem on a flat-back truck driven through the streets, like a transported glimpse of an American gym, with barcodes on their close-cropped heads, suggestive of their being no more than interchangeable, homogenized parts of a larger machine, yet in complete isolation. 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 of the chorus repeat: “Down with McDonald’s, Long live Big Beñat!” (the name of the Basque delicacy).

The claim made in this video is in 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.⁴ 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. The terms of resistance are defined by the fact that cultural resistance today takes place in a context that, though increasingly global, still falls under the hegemonic sway of an American culture gone global. If this is the outcome of a long process, let us now turn to the question of origins, of how America's cultural sway has come about, or rather how America has managed to establish itself as a cultural empire.

America's Cultural Empire

The word "empire" is richly suggestive. It calls forth in our minds images of a vast geographic expanse, coinciding with a reach of political and military control extending from one clear center to far-flung frontiers, usually contested. If these are the geopolitical associations we tend to connect with the word, it has different connotations as well. As any good dictionary will remind us, it is possible to "hold empire," as in the expression "to hold empire over the minds of men." This then is to do with the psychological, or cultural, dimension of empire.

When the topic is America, and the question to be answered is whether America, or more precisely, the United States, can be seen as an empire, the challenge is to place the country generically as an empire among empires, while at the same time acknowledging the specifics of the case. After all, America is a late joiner, an imperial upstart. It came to its imperial position under conditions radically different than previous empires had known. Much as it found inspiration in its early days as a republic in the history of Rome and Athens, once it consolidated its existence as a continental state it saw itself carried forward by the great modernizing transformations of the time: in industrial production, in communication, in technological know-how, and in political democracy. In the language of the day Americans saw themselves engaged in the pursuit of their manifest destiny, and, tellingly, of the westward course of empire. It was their way of placing

themselves in teleological traditions dating back to Virgil and Bishop Berkeley, yet at the same time they invented novel ways of pursuing ancient dreams. They could act in a world, from the late nineteenth century on, that went through the early stages of globalization, making for a geopolitical theater of shrinking distances and increasing connectivity and interdependence. All these trends would pick up speed during what would become known as “the American century.” And with reason. America, as a relatively new actor on the world stage, came to be seen as the center of modernity, a new center of gravity toward which the political compasses across the globe came to point. In the course of the twentieth century it evolved into the hub of networks in global communication, in finance, in production and innovation, in military technology, and in the techniques of mass entertainment. In the pursuit of its manifest destiny it availed itself of all these transformations, more successfully than any rival.

Thus, as it emerged triumphantly from World War II, it quickly consolidated its hegemonic sway by brilliantly interweaving the various strands of imperial reach, benefiting from the many feedback loops that modernity provided. It could turn itself into the “irresistible empire,” as Victoria de Grazia felicitously calls it, by mercurially morphing from one tempting model of modernity into another. Thus, as the obvious military hegemon in post-World War II days, it could use its power to give guidance to the political and economic restructuring of Europe through the Marshall Plan, facilitating trade and reconstruction through economic assistance. It also used its power to pry open European markets for America’s mass cultural products, foremost among them Hollywood’s film production. Film in particular was not just a commodity subject to the logic of free trade but also a tool of cultural diplomacy, exposing European publics to the seductive power of America’s dream worlds, of fantasies of the good life as conceived by Americans. Thus America proved expert at turning the hard power of its dominance, military and economic, into the soft power of holding empire over the minds of men,

shaping their cultural appetites and dreams in ways that have led observers to speak of Americanization.

Interwoven as the forms of America's dominance are, interconnected as the ways may be in which America holds empire, in the following I propose to disentangle two dimensions, one cultural, to do with the process of Americanization, the other to do with the hard power involved in holding empire. Each part of my argument revolves around a central dilemma. In the case of America's cultural empire the dilemma is one of agency on the part of those subject to the process of Americanization: what precisely is the freedom of choice when people style their lives after American models? This particular constellation of the ways in which America holds empire points up the specifically modern, if not postmodern, form of its hegemonic power. It suggests a voluntary subordination of those under the sway of America's imperial reach that has led some observers to speak of empire by invitation, or empire by adoption. Yet this is only part of the story. Repeatedly, America has had to rely on classic forms of hard power to retain imperial control, fighting wars and sending armies to the far corners of empire. These uses of hard power, I would argue, take us to the consideration of the central dilemma that resides in the tenuous symbiosis between the hard power sustaining empire and the survival of democracy. This dilemma will engage us in our further exploration of the dimensions of anti-Americanism. Often the resistance to America's exercise of hard power, as at the time of the Vietnam War, its armed intervention in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, or later on its invasion of Iraq, produced strange fusions of American cultural icons and its hard-power exploits. Antiwar protesters at the time of the Vietnam War often went clad in blue jeans and T-shirts, sporting the effigies of America's countercultural heroes, like Angela Davis. On the other hand, as we mentioned before, protest could take its aim at mass-cultural icons such as McDonald's. In almost a dance of musical chairs, America's soft-power emblems could change places with the symbols of their hard-power pres-

ence in the world, its embassies, its military bases. But let us try to disentangle the two and first look more closely at American empire as resting on its uses of soft power.

Journalist Ron Suskind, who at the time worked for the *New York Times*, has this telling story about an exchange with a White House aide, possibly Karl Rove himself, presidential advisor to George W. Bush:

The aide said that guys like me [journalists like Suskind] were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” . . . “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”⁵

This is a far cry indeed from a Jeffersonian “empire of liberty,” let alone an “empire of reason.”⁶ What Suskind was offered was a view of a postmodern, deconstructionist world in which the reality principle no longer set any meaningful constraints—a view not of an empire of reason, but of a realm where human volition, like a Nietzschean “will to power,” was in command. “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” This voluntarist, if not cavalier, attitude toward truth and reality may remind one of the famous line by the newspaper man in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): “This is the West, Sir. When the legend becomes fact, we print the legend.”

The words quoted by Suskind may strike us like the musings of a delusional mind, more likely to be encountered behind the walls of an asylum than inside the White House. They evoke an “Alice in Wonderland” world, where you can put a president, dressed in bomber jacket, on an aircraft carrier under a banner declaring “Mission Accomplished” and present that as a reality

newly created. They are words conveying a megalomania that in the 1960s Senator J. William Fulbright had already diagnosed as the “arrogance of power.”⁷ But at the same time they are shrewd words, even words of wisdom. They point to what has driven imperial projects throughout history, in a quest for domain and dominance. Time and time again new realities *have* been created and space been opened up for hegemony to be established and an imperial writ to run. Not every attempt along such lines need end in parody, in a object lesson in human hubris. As a long line of studies of empire have shown, there is an arch to the history of empires, a rise followed by decline, but their natural histories, their life cycles, constitute a substantive body of historical reality, more than being the elusive chimeras conjured before our eyes by the illusionism of our postmodern culture of mediated spectacle. There are substantive realities calling for scholarly attention, although they may be hidden from view by their rendition as media spectacle. We may see this illustrated in the “shock and awe” media version of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or of the television rendition of the first Gulf War as a high-tech spectacle. In response, French semiotician Jean Baudrillard felt induced to write on the alienating experience of watching history unfold on the TV screen. He ironically titled his little book: *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991).

When Baudrillard chooses to focus on the illusionism and media manipulation attending the display of imperial power, when he highlights the reduction of a real war being waged to the entertainment value of a video war game, he reminds us of the reality principle in history, and of its real cost in human lives and human suffering. Yet at the same time he reminds us of what we might call the principle of *virtual* reality in our postmodern world, where mass audiences live by the very fictions conjured before their eyes. Virtual worlds and virtual realities are the permanent setting of many people’s contemporary lives. An astute observer of this is German film maker Wim Wenders. Fascinated from an early age by America and American culture, yet increas-

ingly aware of the Americanization of the culture of his German homeland, he had one character in his film *Kings of the Road* come up with this aphorism: “The Yanks have colonized our subconscious.” This one line beautifully captures a central dimension of the sway that America holds over people’s imaginations, inside and beyond its national borders. It is the power of what is commonly referred to as America’s cultural imperialism, yet a power that gainsays anything the word “imperialism” suggests. American cultural conquest works through the subconscious of its subjects, colonizing it almost by stealth, shaping people’s cultural appetites, tastes, yearnings, and needs in an American vein simply by exposing them to its radiance and appeal.

Of course, all empires have used entertainment to keep the populace contented, famously through “bread and circuses,” as the Romans had it, but they were not like anything we find in present-day mass media of communication and entertainment. Mass culture has undergone a modernizing transformation, in all its stages from production, through its dissemination and advertising, to its eventual consumption. And American mass culture, from its early formation in the late nineteenth century to the present day, has always managed to corner the world market and expose a world audience to its impact.⁸

Studying this impact, scholars of Americanization have pointed to the pleasure principle in the reception of American mass culture. In its many forms, American mass culture offered a free range for the imagination to roam, allowing people to consider alternative lifestyles and identities, suggesting a freedom to be your own agent in projecting your life. Yet, as critics of mass culture have pointed out all along, there was always the threat of enslavement, of mass culture offering nothing more than an opiate for the people. This line of critique has evolved from being a cheap form of vulgar Marxism into a rather subtle form of deconstructionism, in tune with the “linguistic turn” taken by the new American Studies.⁹ This recent trend has led many Americanists to revisit the very language they use and critically to ex-

amine the tacit assumptions underlying the concepts central to their understanding of America. As recent presidential addresses to the American Studies Association (ASA) illustrate, this self-examination can go so far as to lead to a call for deleting the word “America” from American Studies, as a concept inherently indoctrinating and imperialist (cf. Radway). Key words in traditional American Studies are seen as tools of indoctrination by stealth, inducing a world view subject to American agency and control. This is probably what Wim Wenders had in mind when he spoke of America colonizing the Europeans’ sub-conscious. What the new American Studies approach pursues is to uncover the way this process works and to point to language as the Trojan horse smuggling in covert readings and meanings, presenting them as conventional and natural while subtly bending and subverting people’s views of the world.

It is an approach that in spite of its claims of novelty is reminiscent of good old-fashioned Marxist *Ideologiekritik*, bringing tacit ideological structures to light through critical analysis. From that more general perspective it appears that there are longer lines of self-reflexive critical writing in American Studies, particularly so in American Studies varieties inspired by cultural studies sensibilities. Be that as it may, it is certainly the case that the serious study of American mass culture, as one of the tools allowing the United States to hold empire over the minds of others, needs the double focus. We need to understand why people outside America’s borders, as well as inside, willingly let themselves be drawn into a universe of American invention, doing so of their own free will. Using the other focus, we also need to understand what hidden messages they expose themselves to while enjoying the fun. That is the part where American agency comes into play, the agency of the sender rather than the receiver. And not only do Americanists need to do this for our present day and age, they need to go back in time and trace the longer history of ideological manipulation (or of attempted mind control) exerted through the dissemination of American mass culture.

A good case in point is another presidential address to the ASA, Amy Kaplan's 2003 discussion of "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire."¹⁰ She notes that the word "empire" has entered general discussion in the United States on a scale not seen before. Instead of being an empire in denial, or an empire that does not dare speak its name, it is fashionable now, Kaplan says, to debate whether this is a new imperialism or business as usual, whether the United States should be properly called imperial or hegemonic, whether it is benevolent or self-interested, whether it should rely on hard power or soft power, whether this empire most closely resembles the British empire or the Roman, and whether it is in ascendancy or decline.¹¹ She goes on to make this important point: "I am not interested in joining these debates here but in discussing the language that frames them and how the word *empire* appears in a constellation of other words in the political lexicon, such as *terrorism* and *homeland*."¹² The denial and disavowal of empire, she goes on to argue, has long served as the ideological cornerstone of U.S. imperialism and a key component of American exceptionalism. She describes her own approach as a method of exposure, one that reveals the repressed violence embedded in cultural productions or that recovers stories of violent oppression absent from prior master historical narratives.

These words precisely describe the program for a new American Studies as it has evolved in recent years, a program that aims at unveiling the techniques that mass-cultural productions avail themselves of in communicating imperial readings of the world, seen from an American vantage point. Much work in this vein, by Kaplan herself and many others, has looked at the ways in which early forms of American mass culture—the "yellow press," World's Fairs, Wild West shows, early film rushes of the storming of San Juan Hill (mostly studio reenactments, by the way)—entertained the masses while at the same time communicating the exhilaration of imperial ventures and the psychological satisfactions of forming the top tier of hierarchies of

race and civilization. Many of these readings were subliminal and unreflective, insinuating themselves into the “normal” ways of conceiving of the world.

Yet at the same time many of these readings were a conscious part of the cultural productions of the late nineteenth century, put there by cultural entrepreneurs who as a group represented the cultural elite of the time. They were engaged in establishing and sustaining the forms of cultural hegemony and cultural capital that Antonio Gramsci and later on Pierre Bourdieu have theorized. Earlier historical research has looked at the elite levels in society, at the circles in politics, journalism, and intellectual life, that gave articulate support to America’s imperialist stance.¹³ Such support could come from unexpected corners, including prominently the Progressives of the time. While being critical of big business at home for excessive profits and substandard wages, they saw nothing incongruous when they also supported American investments abroad in the interest of expanded markets. The man most convincingly articulating this spirit of the time was Herbert Croly in his *The Promise of American Life*. As Croly argued, Theodore Roosevelt’s imperial ventures were an important phase of the new religion of national reform, steps toward the fulfillment of the promise of American life. There were only a few dissenters among American Progressives, such as Jane Addams, but most shared fully in cherishing the aspirations of middle-class America, including the new sense of delight in the rise of the United States as a world power. There was a new, more modern and activist, sense of the national interest that appealed to Roosevelt. It was to inspire Roosevelt’s Osawatomie address and lead to his break with the conservative Old Guard. Historical research in this vein allows us to explore the reigning views held by America’s elites as they were vying for cultural hegemony. It helps us to focus on the forms of public discourse used at the time to express such reigning views.

Yet, at the same time, at a more popular level these visions and enthusiasms would inform cultural productions intended

for mass consumption. Cultural historians and Americanists of a more recent vintage are adding to our understanding of how such hegemonic views could end up holding empire over the minds of Americans first, and of foreign audiences later on, following their exposure to America's mass culture. America's mastery of forms of mass entertainment, coming to full fruition in the latter half of the nineteenth century, aimed first at Americanizing the millions of strangers in its midst, the hordes of immigrants coming to its shores. Having mastered the trick of conveying its readings of America as a meaningful construct across the manifold cultural lines dividing its heterogeneous population, it could then avail itself of this cultural competence in exposing foreign publics to its cultural programs. As it turned out, America proved equally successful in crossing the many national divides that had cordoned off national cultures before. It entertained the many, while exposing them to implied readings of America's sway, cultural and political as well. Mickey Mouse may have been an early trail blazer, bringing happiness and joy wherever he went. But as we have seen, sometimes a mouse is more than a mouse, an insidious rodent patiently gnawing away at the foundations of cultural sovereignty abroad.