

The Great Void

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On paper, America would seem to be obsessed with history and culture, particularly that of Europe. Places such as The Getty Museum, and Hearst Castle demonstrate a desire to connect to the “Old World”, both historically and culturally. Yet the accuracy of these homages to Europe also demonstrate varied success in interpretation, and varied goals for the interpretation. As a result, America’s perspective on history, of Europe, and the world is often seen through skewed lenses, where the real and the fake live together as one. But how did we get here, and why?

In the spring of 2010, I took a month-long trip, exploring Spain and France. It was my first trip to Europe. I experienced the history and beauty of Barcelona and Valencia, and its rich Catalan and Valencian cultures, respectively. I saw the amazing walled city of La Cité in Carcassonne, France. Lastly, I experienced the amazing city of Paris, for nearly 2 ½ weeks. Traveling to these places by car gave me a unique perspective on the beauty, and timelessness of Europe. Timeless buildings that have stood for hundreds of years. Buildings and castles in the middle of no-where, that exist without fanfare, large signage, or neon-lights. Roads that don’t go everywhere (but do manage to always have a frustrating roundabout), but exist in perfect condition, with perfectly manicured trees and bushes nearby. And sensible conservation efforts, such as motion-sensor lighting in every building, dual-pane vinyl windows, multi-function toilets, and effective public transportation. “Old Europe” and the new, technology-savvy Europe exist as one, and exist to each other’s benefit. Flat-screen, plasma T.V.’s in Notre Dame might sound like blasphemy to some, but it brilliantly keeps “the old” part in the “right now”, without losing what makes it so special.

While I have lived in the United States my entire life, I pride myself on being a pretty good student of history. I’ve read all about places like Versailles, Notre Dame, and Sagrada Familia, but no reading could prepare me for the experience of actually being there. It is humbling to be in the presence of these beautiful testaments to art, culture, and history. I

never fully realized what we were missing in America, until I experienced how much other countries have. I was there long enough to be accustomed to all that beauty and history, to the point that my day didn't feel complete unless I saw something amazing.

Coming back to the U.S., was a jolt that I wasn't prepared for. As my friend and I drove home from LAX, I remember a feeling of horror. Everywhere around me was a building, but not one was worth looking at. I drove on a freeway made up of 6 lanes, yet none was without potholes, or litter. Cities full of strip malls, and neon-lights, designed and built for the "right-now", but definitely not for the ages. Noticing my crushing realization, my friend joked "Don't sweat it. We have plenty of art and culture here in Newbury Park. For instance, we have the Rite Aid, which is very art nouveau". Funny, but it was difficult to muster even a chuckle.

The following day I picked up my friend and his friends to do a weekend of wine-tasting in Solvang, California. It was a bachelor retreat of sorts, and I was the groom's best man. Experiencing Paris and Solvang within a 36 hour period of time, was quite eye-opening, and again, depressing. Whereas only 36 hours earlier I was in the city that gave the world such notable monuments as the Eiffel Tower, The Louvre, and Notre Dame, I was now in a city that seemed to be what developers on acid must have imagined Denmark to look like. Windmills everywhere you turn. Tacky hotels, and eateries. Pastry shops selling only the most common Danish delights. And a willing public that imagines they've been magically transported 5,600 miles to the "real thing." Previous trips to Solvang did not inspire such contempt. But after having a taste of the real Europe, I couldn't help but feel surrounded by nonsense.

So what is behind America's obsession with crude imitations, and co-opting other country's cultures? I believe a big part of it has to do with the idea of "horror vacui", that any space must be filled with something. It's a concept explored in Umberto Eco's piece, Travels in Hyperreality, and my time in Europe seems to lend credence to this idea. Removing even the cultural or historical argument for a moment, we see a vast difference in attitude and lifestyle between America and Europe. As I observed in Europe, less is usually more, and the focus is quality, not quantity. This is demonstrated in restaurants, where the meal portions are just enough to satisfy you, but not a bit more, and every bite is delicious and carefully prepared. It's demonstrated in its architecture where buildings aren't designed for a fad or moment, aren't

designed to look old or new, and won't be torn down in 20 years to make way for a strip mall. In fact, in some cases, like with Sagrada Familia, the edifice has been carefully crafted for over 100 years now. Quality over quantity is demonstrated in Europe's careful use of roads that are limited as to not tread on nature, but exist in impeccable condition. Europe's cars are almost always smaller than in the U.S., yet are refined and luxurious, and are not driven in fear or embarrassment. And as I've already mentioned, Europe's conservation and environmental efforts are smart, don't negatively affect the public, and are employed in just about every building you see.

The U.S. on the other hand, has a "more is better" mentality. Meal portions in restaurants are often more than one can eat (or should eat for that matter), and the quality is usually not as important as the quantity. Buildings are put together quickly, with little regard to timelessness, as if they already know that 20 years from now, that building will be torn down to make something bigger and thus "better." In the U.S., we have roads that go everywhere regardless of what's there, but the condition of those roads are often marginal at best. Our vehicles are big, and often times are trucks and SUV's that promise to go everywhere else our abundance of roads doesn't already take us. Lastly, while America does offer a hodgepodge of great environmental and conservation solutions, none of them are applied consistently, likely due to America's inherent malevolence towards limitation, particularly when it's an order from the government.

The "quantity over quality" mentality of the U.S. rears its head again when it comes to travel. "Why spend the time and money to travel 5,600 miles to Paris, when you can experience the wonders of Paris, Venice, and Monte Carlo all in one city; Las Vegas? Why travel through the entire country of Denmark to see windmills and eat Æbleskiver, when you can just take a short drive to Solvang? What's the point in experiencing Versailles when you can see replicas of it at The Getty Center?" Most Europeans would scoff at such blasphemy, but the majority of Americans would probably feel confident in their decision to get more "bang for the buck".

And so horror vacui carries over into culture and history. In a country where "more is always better" America finds itself with a unique problem when it comes to culture and history. It's hard to fully grasp how young a country America is until you've experienced how old Europe

is. For me, I always understood this on a theoretical level, but never on a tangible level. Indeed, in America there is a great cultural and historical void. We are obsessed with history and other cultures because we are such a young country, and thus have very little in the way of our own history and culture. Most of America has its ancestral roots in Europe, which arguably has the longest, proudest, and richest known history in the world. And yet these Americans with European ancestry have no long, rich, proud history to celebrate in their own country, the United States. Regardless of how old you are, rich you are, etc. there is a comparative void when looking at the history and culture of our European cousins.

Also keep in mind that because America has become such a melting-pot, and has so many cultures living here, there is a lack of one, clear, defined national culture, something we as humans need in order to connect with others, and feel like we belong. I know I've long felt that void, coming from Italian and Irish ancestry that purposely put aside their culture in the quest to be more "American". My Hispanic friends have not suffered such a loss, and as such still act and behave as part of clear, definitive culture. To fill the void in my own life, I've adopted many of their customs and traditions, and have in turn been dubbed an "Honorary Latino" by many of them and their families. I believe America has done this on a macro level, co-opting whatever cultures it connects to, whatever history interests us, and trying to be part of anything rather than nothing. As the Forest Lawn example in Eco's piece demonstrates to me, we are so afraid of losing our past, our culture, our legacy, that we cling to the only one we know. And for much of America, that means Europe.

The east coast of the United States appears to suffer less from this cultural and historical void than the rest of the country, especially the west coast. I believe this is due to the clear European influence on the region, because it was conquered and developed by European settlers hundreds of years in some cases before the United States was a country. Much of the old east coast is modeled after Europe, and to this day, still resembles it. As Eco points out, "Manhattan as a result of its direct influence from its European inhabitants exhibits the best of Europe and the legitimate "revivalist awareness of the period". Some southern U.S. cities such as New Orleans have a defined history and culture too, that haven't fallen victim to crude imitations. Its old world cuisine is a mixture of many European countries, but French culture,

architecture and food are the most notable influence in New Orleans. This has always been the case though, and as such, is legitimate in its homage to French culture.

The West Coast on the other hand was conquered and developed hundreds of years later by people who were already clearly American, not European, who shared a defined and united spirit, and ideology, but not so much a clear style, or culture, or history. In fact, the spirit of the west was one of individualism, self-reliance, and entrepreneurship. It only looked forward, not back, and shed the confines of their ancestral roots. Culture, history, education, and style took a back seat in the taming of the west. It's easy to see how we ended up with Solvangs, Madame Tussauds, and Madonna Inns. Nothing could be more "west coast" than rolling the dice, and attempting to strike gold by building a cheap knock-off.

So it seems we are at least partly obsessed with tacky monuments to history and culture because of our collective need to fill a void. There is no clear, defined history or culture, or as Eco points out, the U.S. is a "Country with much future, but no historical reminiscence." But why does a lack of a clear or long standing culture or history mean that we must imitate everything, and why must the imitation so often be crude or lacking a certain amount of truthiness?

For one thing, we are a visual society. Because known history transpired in other parts of the world until the last few hundred years, we do not have the real remnants of that history to see and visit in this country. Rather than just read about them, we need to see them, to imagine them through a replication in order to feel like we are there, in order to understand what transpired. It's only real if we can experience it, and in order to make history "come-alive", recreations are often "sexed-up" to make the experience more enticing, and more interesting.

Also, America has had a history feeling like and acting like an island, and thus the history and artifacts of a distant Europe, or Africa seem as far away as they are old. In fact, any museum or theme park time that removes you from the all-consuming, day-to-day obligations of modern American society, can feel like an escape, a make-believe land that is more about fulfilling our sensory, and imaginary needs, than our need for accuracy or education. We, as Americans deal with harsh reality, both in our individual lives, and collectively as the world's

superpower, and indeed, often the world's police. When we can escape this reality, we do, regardless of how crude or low-brow it is, or how loosely it is based on anything real. Sometimes, that can make the experience all the more better. "Fantasyland" in the guise of a cute, happy and innocent town called "Solvang" can be just the ticket to escaping the harsh realities a society confronting wars in the Middle-East and daily terror alerts. "Sexed-up" history or culture can be good for us. Unfortunately, the consequences can also be negative. Obviously, the intertwining of real and imaginary can leave many who rely on the replica for education, to not know where reality ends, and creative license begins. This can skew our world view, and indeed our understanding of how the world works, and how it use to work.

Clearly, Americans believe in our future, or else, we would probably live in Europe. But we also recognize that we are missing a past, and look elsewhere to fill that void. America's desire for always having more, our need to "experience" history and culture while at the same time be removed from reality, all play a role in amount of culture and history we get, and in the quality of it. Needless to say, America is a great country, with many wonderful attributes. A fair assessment of what it is we do, and why we do it should only serve to make us stronger, and better. For indeed, we will only have a better future, if we fully understand our own history culture, as well as the history and culture of others.