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**In Defense of *Civilisation*: Modernism, Anti-Americanism and the Struggle for Cultural Identity in French Art (1953-1968)**

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*Rhiannon Vogl, Carleton University*

Modernism and modernity have long been synonymous with national and cultural identity in France. In Paris, “the absolute sovereignty of Modernism is ushered in around 1910 by a rupture with the classical and traditional vocabulary: the divine and the human, the city, history, paternity. The reign is consolidated after World War I with Cubism, abstract art and the rise of the Bauhaus” (Lefebvre 1-2). World-renowned as the centre of creative innovation, Paris at the dawn of the twentieth century stood as the urban hub of intellectual and artistic development, symbolized by the power and grace of the Eiffel tower and the cosmopolitan city’s burgeoning avant-garde. The end of the Second World War marked a dramatic shift away from this notion of Paris as the cultural capital of the world; with the onset of the Cold War and the rise of the United States as the new purveyor of modernity as both the international economic and political leaders, France’s position as the cultural centre of the developed world came greatly under threat. The subsequent loss of Modernism was equated with a crisis of national identity and the need of France to regain cultural superiority became all the more pressing. As a means by which to theorize French reactions to this cultural shift, artistic manifestations of this national trauma will be explored in detail through this paper.

Since this topic has been examined extensively both in relation to American foreign policy and governmental influences on the production and promotion of American Modern art in the 1950s,<sup>56</sup> this examination will present a treatment of lesser-known French artists from 1953-1968, and an exploration of their artistic responses to the influx of Americanism, consumerism and the American way of life. The fervent anti-American reactions one witnesses in art of this period,

specifically in that of the Narrative Figuration artists, represents not only a turn against American cultural imperialism, but more intrinsically, a marked attempt to retain the particularities of humanism, intellectualism and *civilisation* that define what it is to be French. These artists' virulent resistance to Americanism ultimately demonstrates a deep cultural need for the French to retain their sense of universalism in terms of cultural production and represents a direct response to the fear of the loss of modernism as national identity.

Naoki Sakai theorizes that "the claim to universality frequently serves to promote the demands of nationalism" (98). Before the Second World War, the French tended to see themselves as the universal centre of the modern world. Indeed, as Sakai notes, "the west, [for the purposes of this paper, France] is particular in itself, but is also constitutes the universal point of reference in relation to which others recognize themselves as particularities. And in this regard, the west [France] thinks itself to be ubiquitous" (95). Echoing Sakai's observations, historian J.M. Blaut asserts that "Europeans are seen as the 'makers of history.' Europe eternally advances, progresses, modernizes. The rest of the world advances more sluggishly, or stagnates" (1). Blaut notes that the preconditions for such cultural superiority are based in what he terms the Myth of the European Miracle, that which justifies the rise of Europe as the universal by virtue of forces embedded historically in the cultural fabric of Europe; the belief that the rise of Europe was based solely on internal forces of Europeans themselves and not, as Blaut points out, "because of the inflowing of wealth and innovations from non-Europe" (59). From these Eurocentric assumptions, Blaut argues, European Diffusionism arises, which accepts and perpetuates the "notion that the world as a whole has one permanent centre from which culture-changing ideas tend to originate, and a vast periphery that changes as a result of diffusion from that single centre"<sup>57</sup>. Advanced and defended by scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, European Diffusionism thus

explains and upholds the mythology of Europe's permanent geographical superiority and cultural universality.

It is in fact the crisis of the myth of cultural superiority that results in the negative French reactions towards America and American culture at the end of the Second World War. While the experience of foreign occupation and collaboration during the war deepened the nation's sense of humiliation, the fall of France in 1940 ultimately marked the nation's loss of status as a great power (Kuisel 17). As Sakai goes on to demonstrate, by the end of the Second World War, "universalism and modernity [had become] more closely interwoven with American nationalism than ever before" (98). It is at this moment in history that a radical shift in global power structures thus occurred, placing the United States at the fore as the central cultural and economic fountainhead.

While many European countries, including France, were economically and socially devastated by the war having been fought within their borders, the American allies emerged from the Second World War virtually unscathed. Very little conflict had taken place on American soil, and the vast economy established by the American government during the conflict had led to a post-war prosperity unlike anything known in the European region. Thus in the position to provide foreign aid to its allies, the United States developed what was known internationally as the Marshall Plan, but internally as the European Recovery Plan.

As the conception of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, the Plan would aid in the reconstruction of the European economy, providing relief by way of food and fuel, while ultimately serving to reorder European society through a promotion of transatlantic ties, based on the assumption that the United States and Western Europe shared common cultural norms and values (Mckenzie 2-4). Rationalization and modernization of the European economy and social fabric was promoted relentlessly through the Plan and a clear attempt was made to demonstrate the overarching benefits of such systems. It

was also implicit however, that "in rationalizing itself...[European] society becomes similar to America. Or, to put it slightly differently, progress always means Americanization" (Sakai, 97-98). The Marshall Plan may then be seen as a method by which the United States could assert the universality of their mode of modernization over Europe.

More than a method for distributing economic aid, the Marshall Plan encouraged a very specific type of social recovery after the Second World War. There was a general fear that economic disparity and material deprivation would ultimately lead to the rise of communism, and there was an even greater anxiety in the American government that if France fell to communism, the rest of Europe would be soon to follow. According to Marshall, "the crisis in Europe was a threat to modern civilization because it led to disturbances arising as a result of the desperation of the people concerned." (Mckenzie 4). France had thus become a central focus of the Marshall Plan Policy makers in the United States saw France as "a weakened country, which was in need of spiritual and cultural renewal" (Mckenzie 6). In an attempt to ward off such disparity, the United States was marketed to France by way of films, exhibitions, various publications and educational programs, as a social, cultural and economic model to be emulated. "A particular fantasy was exported by the United States, along with the gadgets, technologies and exports of American capitalism, to a Europe divested by war - the fantasy of timeless, even and limitless development" (Ross 10). Thus the 'American way of life,' most notably the purchase and possession of mass-produced consumer goods and the cultural values attached to such conspicuous consumption, became an American export in its own right, which consequently, would mean a critical challenge to French national identity.

By 1953, American-style modernization and the subsequent postwar economic boom had taken off in France, financed by nearly three million dollars in aid provided by the Marshall Plan (Wilson 418). While most western European

countries fell under the immense cultural, economic and political influence of the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, in no country did Europeans argue as bitterly about the suitability of the American model as they did in France (Chapman 297). According to Richard Kuisel in *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*, such rebellion against America had its principal source in the need for a strong conception of French national identity rather than a fundamental dislike of American lifestyles and mores. "The challenge was to become economically and socially "modern" without such American sins as social conformity, economic savagery, and cultural sterility" (Kuisel, 3). What also became essential at this time was the need to discover, preserve (and at times even invent) that which had been, and was unique to the French national community, against the perceived homogenizing effects of American modernization. More often than not, such definitions were played out and illustrated through the artistic production of Parisian artists.

One of the principle features in defining both Frenchness and French universality in contrast to the Americans was the concept of *civilisation*. In the 1950s, "it became commonplace for intellectuals to contrast French good taste, quality, erudition, individuality and manners with American banality, conformity, anti-intellectualism and optimism" (Chapman 298), essentially as a means by which to differentiate French *civilisation* from American commercialization. Kuisel stresses that for many intellectuals the stakes of the debate about America were quite political -- a negative vision of America provided a way to reaffirm the universality of Frenchness. "Frenchness, as measured by the American Other, had featured attributes like individualism, *la douceur de vivre*, and humanistic *civilisation*" (Kuisel, 7). At times, America was outright denied the notion of possessing any signs of civilization whatsoever. A tone of cultural superiority often thus marked the French discourse regarding the New World of the United States.

This type of stereotyping remained a fixed cultural norm in French society throughout the decade, and marked Americans

as *les grands enfants*, a country that was both too young and too immature to truly be civilized. While asserting their cultural superiority over the United States, this French caricature of American citizens may also be considered a foil by which to prop up the mythic identity of the French nation. As Sakai argues, France was “urged to approach others in order to ceaselessly transform its self-image... [seeking] itself in the midst of interaction with the Other” (94). Thus, Kuisel notes more specifically, “if Americans were conformists and youthful, then implicitly the French were individualists and mature” (36), French identity is here defined only by American shortcomings—fulfilling that which America lacks.

At this point in history, the French, in their assessment of America, tended more than other nationalities, to perceive Americans as *dominateurs* or a cultural menace (Kuisel, 30). The Paris art world ultimately reflected this prejudice. For the majority of artists and critics active at the time, the United States remained an imperialist country, both geopolitically and culturally. Thus, as Eric de Chassey writes, “few in Paris recognized any merit in new American art, and even fewer allowed themselves to be influenced” (344). Chassey also highlights the inherent prejudice on the part of French artists towards their American counterparts. In the cultural as well as political sphere, “America was looked down upon, either as too young a country to produce real art or as simply an imperialist country whose culture was based on propaganda and exploitation” (de Chassey, 334). Resistance to American art served to protect *civilisation* against the more broadly perceived vulgarity of the American system.

André Fougeron’s *Atlantic Civilization* of 1953 [Figure 1], a quintessential anti-American artwork of the period, alludes to America’s growing reputation as a dictatorial society.



**Figure 1** André Fougeron *Atlantic Civilization*, 1953

Dividing the picture plane in two, with French society depicted on the left and that of America on the right (perhaps itself indicative of the perceived political leanings of each country) Fougeron has, in his own words, illustrated “the American occupation of our country” (de Chassey 345). America is symbolized here by the central figure of the GI relaxing on a chair with a pornographic magazine and by the big blue voracious Buick. Fougeron introduces signs of American ‘brutality’, both the in the treatment of the environment and the economy, as demonstrated through the large industrial factory that seems to encompass and suffocate the French children in the upper left of the image. The physical brutality of the New World is also present, depicted in the GI who is pointing his rifle towards the left (French) side of the image, as well as the electric chair held high on a pedestal, which remains a powerful symbol of American political violence.<sup>2</sup>

Deliberately contrasted in direct opposition to American violence and extremism, French humanism and compassion are illustrated here as the only viable alternative. Fougeron’s *Atlantic Civilization* thus becomes illustrative that “what we



normally call universalism is a particularism thinking itself as universalism [...] For [France] to be assumed to represent the most densely universalistic social formation, it must be the most advanced particularity” (Sakai 98-99). Interpreted under the theoretical models set forth by Sakai and Kuisel, Fougeron’s painting may thus operate as a visual representation of both the French necessity to defend *civilisation* by particularizing themselves against the perceived ills and destructive nature of the United States, while also positioning the notion of *civilisation* as a universally superior value system.

The notion of *civilisation* becomes especially interesting in Fougeron’s work because of its explicit mention in the title. Whether deliberate or not, the title *Atlantic Civilization* ultimately sets up a binary opposition between that which is to be associated with the American way of life, (the Atlantic society) against the French *quotidien*, which remains unnamed. The French sense of universalism ultimately relies on their defining themselves against the American Other and the characteristics they perceive intrinsic to the United States. Here, “universalism and particularism endorse each other’s defect in order to conceal their own: they are intimately tied to each other in their accomplice” (Sakai 105). Such views as presented by Fougeron further the notion of French superiority, and in essence characterize an attempt to defend a very particular sense of French self and nationhood that was meant to reign as the universal.

While the first wave of post-war anti-Americanism was a result of the humiliating effects of the Marshall Plan and essentially a product of the early years of the Cold War, the extreme prejudice against the United States remained strong into the height of the political and cultural turmoil of the 1960s, revealing a struggle for modernity, independence and most specifically national identity. Throughout the following decade, the myth of European Diffusionism would remain an intense undercurrent within much art practiced in France; resistance against the America way of life continued to be manifested in the

French cultural sphere as a means by which to assert notions of French superiority and to propagate the country's universalism.

The 1960s marked a substantial shift in the international art market, with New York rising to the fore as the cultural centre of artistic production, criticism and sales.<sup>58</sup> As critic Jean Clair remarked, "cut off from reality and isolated in arrogant provincialism, Paris had long since ceased to play a role of the slightest importance on art's international stage" (de Chassey 348). The notion of European Diffusionism and French cultural superiority came under heavy threat. Whereas many French artists attempted to cling to the idea of Paris as the cultural centre of the world, the burgeoning influence of American critics, curators and museums made it impossible for the French to ignore what was happening on the American scene. Many young and rising artists such as Arman, Christo, Martial Raysse and Daniel Spoerri, who wanted to maintain a sense of international credibility, saw no other viable option than to emigrate to the United States (de Chassey 348), following such Modernist icons as Marcel Duchamp and Piet Mondrian. This global movement ultimately contradicted the notion of European Diffusionism, as culture had now begun to spread out from the New World, rather than diffusing from the European centre as the myth traditionally dictated.

Anti-Americanism at this time was especially rampant among French intellectuals; there no longer seemed to be a need to speculate as to the possible detrimental effects of American culture on French *civilization*—*they were already evident*. Exemplified by the new reliance of French artists on the American cultural system, French society in general had been immersed in Americanization and had consequently been completely swept up in the mode of consumerism. While the country now enjoyed greater affluence, more consumer comforts, easier communication and mobility, it also experienced, according to the intelligentsia, "a life-style centered on acts of purchase, instant obsolescence, incessant advertising, a profusion of foreign companies and products, congested cities,

empty villages, a faster pace of life, pollution, and the corruption of language” (Kuisel 186). Thus sentiments of anti-Americanism became clearly aligned with debates against consumerism.

Attacks on this new abundance were rampant amongst the leftist intellectuals of the time. French theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord vilified this new society of consumers, predicting that that the valuation of consumer objects over social intercourse, of personal gratification over the work ethic, and of prefabricated desires over real needs would lead to extreme social alienation. Baudrillard spoke of consumerism as “a pact with the devil in which individuals sacrificed their identity and transcendence for a world of signs. For these critics America became a reference point” (Kuisel 188). French intellectuals maintained that the country had become victimized by advertising and the commercial object and in these admonitory remarks, anti-American sentiments ultimately melded with the more general fears of consumer culture at large, vilifying the image of the New World. Inherently, at the base of these fears remained the myth of French universalism – American continued to be menace towards the notion of French culture, thus a persistent fear formed where culture and *civilisation* remained in apparent jeopardy.

The protectionism *civilisation* offered provides the key to understanding artistic reactions to America, and specifically the consumerist society it perpetuated. Parisian artists and critics particularly disparaged American Pop artists for their “uncritical acceptance of consumerism and commodity culture, defending the French tradition against foreign contamination, and particularly against the so-called vulgarity of American art” (de Chasse, 348). Although they could not dispute that New York was now the clear centre of the art world, French artists still tended to despise art that did not come (at least indirectly) from Paris. Even in the domain of Pop Art, in which the importance of American artists was paramount, French artists and critics tended to downplay their significance in favour of political vindications.

In the cultural domain, this intense politicization of art comes to stand for that which truly defines the French against the America – the notion of political engagement is contrasted against the perceived social detachments of Americans and their art.

Perhaps the clearest example of this type of concerted particularization on the part of French artists came from the group known as Narrative Figuration. Employing a detached, realist style that mimicked that of poster or silkscreen advertising, this loosely tied group of artists, which included, but was not limited to Pierre Bettencourt, Eduardo Arroyo, Erró (né Gudmundur Gudmundsson), François Arnal, Gilles Aillaud, and Antontio Recalcati, was known for creating highly politically charged works that took an anarchistic stance against Americanism and its pervasive culture. “In all its different varieties, Narrative Figuration was a response to a need for global appropriation of a reality...perceived in time relations. The work of art remains what it has always been: an object of dialogue and confrontation” (Gassiot-Talabot, 275). Through a return to figuration, and the rejection of abstraction, the Narrative Figuration artists sought to engage with both the political and intellectual debates of the day, and positioned themselves in direct opposition to the Vietnam War, consumerism and all things American.

This type of response to American culture was in fact, quite unique in French art. “For the first time in the history of French art, it could be said that French artists were creating against precedents set up by Americans; the singly image of American Pop was being replaced by the multi-layered narrative of French Narrative Figuration” (de Chassey 349). Viewing Pop Art as the illustration of American imperialism, artists such as Erró employed the proto-pop comic book or film strip style as a form of cultural resistance – his work often depicted the generic American home as invaded by both consumer items and heroic-looking Vietcong guerrillas. In images such as *American Interior No. 10* (1968) [Figure 2], American children surrounded by the

luxury of consumer goods are watched over by Chinese Red Guards.



Figure 2 Erró *American Interior No. 10*, 1968

Overtly political in nature, this painting, like many completed by Erró at this time, demonstrates the artist's opinion that the only viable means by which to defeat the American (and consequently the new French) consumerist system was through the domination of extreme leftist political system, whether it be in the form of Chinese Red Guards or, later, the Russian Mujiks (de Chassey, 349). Although accused by some as being inherently ambiguous, Erró's comic-book style painting thus exemplifies the Narrative Figuration style of juxtaposing the banality of everyday living with overtly political commentary.<sup>59</sup>

Erró's *Background to Jackson Pollock* (1967) [Figure 3] also exemplifies the protection of French *civilisation* and universality.



**Figure 3** Erró *The Background of Jackson Pollock*, 1967

Centered on the ubiquitous hero of American Abstract Expressionism, Erró creates a vast collage-scape of European, primarily French first wave Modernist masterpieces, including Picasso's *Demaiselles D'Avignon* (1907), and *Three Musicians* (1921), Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), and various works by Mondrian, Matisse, Van Gogh and the Surrealists, as a claustrophobic backdrop for the American artists. Given both the title of the work and directional manner in which each of the French masterworks seems to converge on the pensive head of Pollock, this image may be read as an endeavor to draw connections between the artistic capacity of the American artists and his reliance on French Modern artists.

Considered in terms of an attempt to safeguard or uphold French *civilisation*, this image reads as an allegorical endeavor to draw direct lineage from French Modernism to the artistic innovations occurring in the New World. Rather than Pollock having been able to be artistically innovative on his own, this image that it is in fact French or European influence that has lead him to his current status as an artist. *The Background of Jackson Pollock* presents an unmistakable visual illustration of Blaut's notion of Eurocentric Diffusionism, representing the 'traditional' flow of culture from Europe to the periphery. It insinuates that the Inside continues to innovate, while the Outside is only capable of imitation. Despite the concrete realities that demonstrated the French were no longer the universal centre of the art world, Erró's work nevertheless continues to assert this type nationalistic Diffusionism, and to utilize the image of the young and immature America as a foil by which prop up the post-war French identity.

Perhaps the most outwardly violent example of anti-American sentiment is the collaborative work of Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antontio Recalcati, titled *To Live or Let Die, of the Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp* (1965) [Figure 4].



Figure 4 Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo and Antontio Recalcati. *To Live or Let Die, or The Tragic End of Marcel Duchamp*, 1965

First shown at “La Figuration Narrative dans l’Art Contemporain” in 1965, the sequence of eight paintings acts as a film or comic strip of the final fictitious hours of Marcel Duchamp’s life, where the quintessential symbol of French art is arrested, beaten, interrogated and knocked nude down a staircase. Both his *Fountain* (1917) and *Large Glass* (1915-23) are appropriated from their status as ready-mades, and through the act of being hand-painted are parodied and robbed of their original intentions.

Assassinated by three men who in fact represent Aillaud, Arroyo and Recalcati (Gassiot-Talabot 301), in the final panel of the series, Duchamp’s coffin is borne beneath the Stars and Stripes like that of a Vietnam War victim, flanked by the American ‘artist-generals’ Andy Warhol, Claus Oldenburg, and French artists Martial Raysse, Arman and Pierre Restany, all of whom had either emigrated to the United States, or who had promoted American values, such as consumerism, in a specifically apolitical manner. The three ‘living’ French protagonists in this narrative, as well as Duchamp, who had emigrated to New York and become an American citizen in 1942 (Wilson, 337), are aligned here with the new American art dictators, and are reproached for their subsequent abdication of French nationality.

In an essay accompanying the series, *How to Get Rid of Him or One Year Later, (Comment s’en débarrasser, ou un an plus tard)* the collective made their hostility to America and its aesthetics explicit by linking this work to their specific political position. “Marcel Duchamp can be seen to be a particularly successful defender of bourgeois culture. He endorses all the falsehoods for which culture anaesthetizes lively energies and makes it live in illusion, thus condoning trust in the future” (de Chassey 349). While continuing to other American as a means by which to propagate French universality, here the collective persists in their particularization of the French as inherently political and leftist leaning. This virulent need to do so appears distinctly here to be connected with the loss of cultural identity



that was associated with Modernism. “Modernity...is always associated with those regions, communities and peoples that appear politically or economically superior to other regions, communities and peoples” (Sakai 95). By submerging Duchamp, one of the pillars of French Modernism under the American flag, one may be inclined to propose that the artists are in fact paying homage to the loss of mythic, universalistic France, perhaps even mourning it. However, the violence with which the collective literally and figuratively murders Duchamp really points elsewhere, namely to the inherent need to protect French culture and nationality from all forms of American influence. Expressing the ruthless opinion that ‘if you are not with us you are against us’ *To Live or Let Die* thus represents a vituperative example of nationalistic French art.

The fear of Americanization became most acute in France the late 1950s when Cold War political polarity made America a prime target of left-wing hostility, as witnessed in the work of André Fougeron. And yet, as illustrated by the artistic production of the Narrative Figuration group, such antagonism continued throughout the 1960s, in the form of anarchist responses to the consumerism and cultural alienation that had thus been associated with the United States. Such resistance ultimately stemmed from deep seeded fears that the French national identity had been put at risk, and was only further exacerbated by the subsequent loss of modernity to the New World. These French artists expressed their resistance as a contest over safeguarding *civilisation* at a time when the American Other seemed on the verge of eradicating Frenchness.

The double bind of the universal and particular binary reveals itself here in full form – it is paradoxically under the weight of universalism that France is forced to overtly particularize itself in the decades after the Second World War. “The French response to Americanization turns on the notion of *civilisation*. For this was how the French defined the distance between the two societies” (Kuisel 235). In order for France to remain universal, it must assert itself as superior over the

particulars beneath it. And yet, when the status of the nation as universally modern is in jeopardy, the sole manner to prop itself up is by deliberately particularizing itself against the periphery, by manifestly nationalizing itself against that which it opposes.

By situating America as Other, and one that represented the vulgarity of materialism, conformity and naive optimism, the French separated themselves from the New World. Artists in particular asserted their universal superiority and perpetuated the reign of European Diffusionism. However, as Sakai notes: “universalism and particularism reinforce and supplement each other, they are never in real conflict” (105). Universality is ultimately illusory, betrayed by the essential self-doubling required to sustain this myth; for a nation to believe itself as the universal, it must inevitably exist as a particular. The study of representative French artistic responses to American art points not only to ways in which France attempted to retain this universality, but also to the flawed logic of their uniqueness during the middle and late twentieth century.

## Notes

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<sup>56</sup> See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; Serge Guilbaut et al, *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990.

<sup>43</sup> The electric chair is in fact a specific comment on the execution of the alleged Soviet-American spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1951.

<sup>58</sup> The logistics of the shift will not be treated in this paper. See Guilbaut, 1983.

<sup>59</sup> Even French art that was considered neutral in its message by the Narrative Figuration artists was recognized as working against the French cause. Artists such as the Nouveau Réalistes,

who depicted consumer items in their work, yet without an overtly political stance, were also chastised by the Narrative Figuration artists

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## ***Paroles Gelées***

**UCLA French Studies**

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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