

benefits. And in a parallel way, the Evangelicals of West Coast conservatism would not have long maintained their new theology if they had adopted it for no reason other than the social emoluments it showered on their situation.

Modern sociology, in other words, seems not to possess much clear understanding that people *actually believe* what they believe. Perhaps sociology cannot, and should not, have that understanding. It aspires to be a modern science, after all, and it cannot admit genuinely supernatural events. But, as a consequence, there will remain what has been present in all sociology of religion ever since the discipline began: a feeling of impotence and incompleteness, a nagging sense of having gotten the whole thing wrong. 📖

Joseph Bottum is a contributing editor to the Weekly Standard.



On the Tides

Laurence Maslon

This July, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, will hit hundreds of movie screens nationwide, and, in the jargon of both American comic books and American movies, he'll hit 'em hard.

In the spring of 1941, some nine months before Pearl Harbor, Captain America, or "Cap" as he would be known to legions of youthful followers, made his debut under the Timely imprint—later to become Marvel Comics in the early 1960s. Cap was one of the hundreds of pretenders to Superman's throne to emerge after the Man of Steel was created in 1938, but while Superman was a metaphor for America, Cap simply was America. His creators, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (born Kurtzberg) were the sons of immigrant Jewish tailors; both of them still had many relatives in Europe. When, on the cover of Captain America No. 1, our (literally) star-spangled hero socked Adolf Hitler in the jaw with a powerful right hook, he was channeling both the pent-up frustration of Jewish Americans and the pent-up aggression of a larger nation.

Over the past seventy years, Captain America has become a popular cultural icon, but it took until 2011 for him to debut in a multi-million-dollar feature film. A week after *Captain America: The First Avenger* opens on July 22, the movie will open in nearly two dozen countries, and two weeks later, in another two dozen countries. In all of those countries, he will be the same patriotic supersoldier of the 1940s, but the film he stars in won't always be called *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Many foreign markets will promote the film as merely *The First Avenger*, "Captain America" being simply too provocative or too jingoistic in some national contexts. There is some question as to whether foreign audiences will welcome the flag-emblazoned Cap, even with the title change. Although superheroes are major cinematic blockbusters around the world, surely this is a brand that stretches the possibilities of cultural adaptation.

This tangled conundrum of cultural influence, cultural identity and cultural export has been a fact of artistic life over the past twelve decades or so, and its manifestation has been most fascinating in the unique exchange of culture between aging Europe and youthful America. The nature of this exchange, its roots and its evolution are at the center of Richard Pells's new book, *Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies & the Globalization of American Culture*.

Pells, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, has written two other books about tectonic shifts in American culture during the middle of the previous century, and, more illuminating, he has spent a good deal of time teaching abroad, particularly in Europe. He is keenly receptive to artistic movements on both sides of the Atlantic and embraces them—perhaps with too wide an arm span—in an eager and near-encyclopedic way. Pells's mission in this latest book is to dispel an apparent misunderstanding about cultural exchange in the 20th century:

Most people, including me, who have written about the worldwide impact of American culture tend to emphasize the ability of foreigners to adapt America's cultural exports to their own needs and traditions. In this book, I am reversing the argument. What interests

me is how Americans have used and transformed the cultural influences they receive from abroad.

I'm not sure I would sign on immediately to his stated assumption that "most people" seem unaware of the contributions of non-Americans to America, nor would, I suspect, anyone who was awake while attaining a liberal arts degree. But any writer who is interested in creatively reversing the polarity of artistic current is of interest to me.

Pells enlists a battery of the world's most influential artists, filmmakers, composers and actors to tell his story of their journey from Europe—actual or perceived—and their influence on American culture. In assembling his forces, he groups them, sometimes uncomfortably, under the rubric of modernists. Upfront, he spells out what he means:

Modernism is a notoriously elastic word. . . . [F]or my purposes, modernism means the effort—beginning in the early twentieth century—to invent a new language to describe the scientific, political, and social upheavals of the modern world. . . . The point [of the modernists included in the book], however, was to force people to see, hear, and think about the world in new ways.

Pells has a heck of a way of swinging a dead cat. In doing so, he manages to hit a vast field of modernist creators: painters (such as Dali, Pollock and Warhol); architects (Gropius, Frank Lloyd Wright); designers (Cedric Gibbons); composers (Stravinsky, Aaron Copland); jazz musicians (Benny Goodman, Miles Davis); songwriters (the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart); commercial film directors (Chaplin, Lubitsch, Wilder); slightly less commercial film directors (Welles, Fritz Lang); even less commercial foreign film directors (Truffaut, John Schlesinger); and American film actors trained in the "Method" (pretty much every decent film actor you can think of, whether they

were actually trained in the Method or not).

It's hard to fault Pells's actual choices, but Modernist America is crammed with an indigestible buffet of famous people. The book contains more proper names than the phone book of a small town. And despite the massive scope of the book itself, Pells evinces a palpable underlying anxiety that someone or something will be left out. A brief (and illuminating) detour about department store design lists nearly a dozen stores in the most obvious American cities. A paragraph about the influence of jazz concludes that, "Jazz acquired listeners not only in Europe (especially in Scandinavia, Britain, France, and underground in Germany during the Nazi regime) but also in the Soviet Union,

Australia, China, Japan, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico." Pells has a tendency to let his comradious enthusiasm get the better of his narrative and his critical stance. It's as if he were describing every participant of a parade down Main Street but neglected to point out (or notice) that the baton twirler is about to fall down an open manhole.

In some ways, Pells may have been hamstrung by the way he organized the book. He devotes a chapter to each of 13 disciplines and relates those narratives chronologically, forcing him each time to reboot the clock back to the turn of the century. This makes cross-disciplinary comparisons a bit inelegant. I was "done" with the Cubists of the 1920s by the time I read about them again in the context of the Actors Studio of the 1950s. It requires Pells to cover the same historical background several times running, and that's no fun for anyone: No one should be forced to come up with, or to read, a dozen different ways to describe the grim march of the Third Reich across Europe.

Pells's broad and informed sweep of narrative might have been more revealing if he had made greater use of the apposite anecdote. While Pells is accurate on, say, the transmutation of jazz into swing in the 1930s, his prose can read like an encyclopedia entry on a well-

**Modernist America: Art, Music, Movies &
the Globalization of American Culture**

Richard Pells

Yale University Press, 2011

known topic. Yet he piques your curiosity when he tosses in a little throwaway about Benny Goodman: that he had become a superstar in Los Angeles because his live radio show was broadcast after midnight on the East Coast but heard by thousands of eager fans after the dinner hour on the West Coast. That is a very neat little insight into the interrelated vagaries of technology, geography, taste and celebrity—just the kinds of things he purports to explore but discovers too rarely. And his lengthy encomium to the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley is seriously (and laboriously) compromised by its lack of any direct quotation from the lyrics that made Broadway an open bazaar for modernism. Perhaps this flaw is owed to a financial consideration, but the effect of pulling, for example, Larry Hart’s metaphors out of their carefully crafted context and listing them one after the other does this particular mordant modernist a disservice.

Pells also has a deep devotion to the accepted works of the Western canon, but, again, the capsule versions of these warhorses refuse to yield much that is new or that provide provocative points of contact. He uses Oscar Hammerstein’s homespun sentimentality (*Oklahoma!*, *The Sound of Music*) as a cudgel with which to beat him, but neglects to mention or discuss *Allegro*, the musical he wrote with Richard Rodgers in 1947. *Allegro* is a complex contemporary narrative that involved cutting-edge stagecraft, some of which was borrowed from Thornton Wilder and put together by Agnes de Mille—two modernists whom Pells admires.

Likewise, Pells often bypasses more resonant examples of his thesis and devotes space to canonical figures, even if their stories are less illuminating. He (understandably) give over many pages to George Gershwin but only mentions Kurt Weill in passing, usually as part of one of those interminable lists. Yet Weill’s would seem to be a seminal biography in a book about how Americans “were greatly influenced by outside ideas and techniques.” When Weill was developing his musical style in Germany between the wars, he had listened to countless American jazz albums, so much so that the Nazis decried his work as “decadent.” When he and his romantic muse, Lotte Lenya, emigrated to

the United States in 1935 (along, of course, with countless other intriguing artists on the run from Hitler), they felt a kind of aesthetic homecoming. As Lenya recounted in a 1971 documentary:

One really unforgettable thing I can remember was on the boat [from Paris] at five in the morning and Kurt came and said ‘Come, come, quickly, you can see the Statue of Liberty’ and that really set your heart on edge because you were really on the way to America, you know? We stayed at the St. Moritz, and we went up twenty floors in the elevator and this was a big shock, because we didn’t have any skyscrapers. First of all, we were ardent readers of America: Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, there was a great fascination. And the movies. There was nothing strange about America, nothing unfamiliar.

A lovely story, as stories go, but the punch line is that Weill devoted himself relentlessly to “making it” in America. Supposedly, he trained himself not to speak German again during the remaining 15 years of his life. While still maintaining his unique composing style, he eventually achieved the success on Broadway that he always desired. Of the 14 stage works he wrote in America, a dozen were set in this country, a record unmatched by any Broadway composer of his time. And the last thing he worked on before he died was a musical version of *Huckleberry Finn*.

While this kind of cultural conundrum doesn’t exactly elude Pells, he lacks a taste for the tangling of irreconcilable ideas that makes cultural history so intriguing, a taste found in other books such as Ann Douglas’s 1995 *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. When he does wrestle with lively incongruent forces, he often ties himself into rhetorical knots. Try as I might, I couldn’t parse the following: “Just as the Abstract Expressionists revolted against the political and social didacticism of the Federal Arts Project, so the beboppers rejected the regimentation of swing.” His comparison, “If Pollock was the Marlon Brando of American painting, Warhol was Mel Brooks”, is a galloping non-sequitur, and the notion that Sean Connery

portrayed James Bond as an “American Batman” made me wish the whole sentence was just a typographical error.

These strained analogies are a shame, because when Pells eases into it, without the gung-ho boosterism for the songs, films or performances he thinks we all love, he can come up with some lovely and provocative passages. He’s excellent on the history of American film distribution in Europe (no mean topic); the egalitarianism of Depression-era movie theaters (where for the first time in an opulent theater, there were no distinctions about where people could sit); and how the French critics embraced jazz in the 1930s and American films after World War II, when they were exposed to a whole new universe of previously embargoed movies. A concluding passage that extends the notion of cultural interchange between Hollywood and Bollywood is illuminating, and it’s refreshing to read his thoughts on non-Western culture.

Ironically, although Pells has little new to say about *Citizen Kane*, for example, his best section is the one about *Casablanca*, a film that one would think had already used up all its available critical oxygen. But Pells reminds us that the movie’s beloved and legendary cast was composed, with the exception of Humphrey Bogart, exclusively—of European émigrés, under the visionary guidance of an émigré director (Michael Curtiz):

The cast of *Casablanca* brought with them to the picture a sense of grief at having had to abandon their livelihood and their communities in the Old World. . . [The real life issues of the Second World War were altered by Hollywood into something] customarily focused on human relationships, not on the problems of a particular time and place. . . . *Casablanca* was only the most celebrated instance of Hollywood’s aversion to preaching. . . . Audiences—no matter where they resided—could see some parts of their own lives reflected in *Casablanca*’s story of love and loss.

Everybody comes to Rick’s and, ultimately and satisfyingly, so does Pells, with an elegantly written and deeply felt sense of how

these cross-cultural concoctions can bring out the best in each culture and yet can be transmuted into something new and wonderful, art that can bridge the gap between nations, cultures, and oceans.

The culture clash between Europe and America is still a work in progress, no matter how modernist or traditional the forces that are brought to bear may be. Thirty years after the fact, I’m still stunned by a cross-cultural encounter during my first visit to London’s West End. As a visiting theater student, I was eager to see the English debut of Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* at the Drury Lane Theater. I was enamored of the show during its run on Broadway and was curious to see how Londoners would embrace such a theatrical, intelligent, artful, provocative version of their local legend, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street. (Indeed, Sondheim had been inspired to musicalize the story after seeing a version of it in a small London theater in 1973.)

As it happened, I went by the box office on the show’s opening night and bought the cheapest possible seat in the upper circle for the matinee on the following week. When I arrived to the Drury Lane, with my ticket clutched in my trembling hand, I went to the upper circle entrance. It was locked and I was told to go to the main lobby. “Sit wherever you like”, the house manager said. So few tickets were sold that about 200 of us sat in the orchestra (stalls) for what I thought, interestingly enough, was a far superior performance to the near-identical Broadway production.

What had happened? The British critics, who normally adore Sondheim, had turned their noses up and panned the show. They resented him gobbling up one of their seminal legends, reducing it to a Broadway musical and trying to fob it back on them as entertainment. Culturally, it was the ultimate example of bringing coals to Newcastle. Had they instead brought Cole Porter to Newcastle, the story might have had a happier ending. 🍷

Laurence Maslon is an associate arts professor at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and the coauthor of *Broadway: The American Musical*.