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Turning In and Out of the American Century

In his “Foreword” to Volume 1 of *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900-1950* (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999), Maxwell L. Anderson, Director of the Museum, stressed the propensity of Americans “to claim that whatever transpires in [their] midst is evidence of manifest destiny,” and candidly defined it as both “endearing” and “exasperating.” My impression is that a non-American scholar – but a fair observer of American history and society – is ready to find that propensity more exasperating than endearing, probably even more so after decades of self-congratulatory expressions of pride in the role of the United States as sole superpower, in a globalized, Americanized political and economic scenario. Anderson’s “Foreword” continued confessing that such typically American behavior and frame of mind could be termed as *hybris*, an attitude upon which the rest of the world looked (in his words) “with a mixture of admiration, amusement, envy, and resentment.” Once again, as far as I can judge from the Eastern side of the Atlantic, the prevailing responses seem to be resentment, irritation, and incredulity, rather than amusement or admiration.

Anderson traced back this American style *hybris* to Emerson’s “happy” paradox, according to which Americans can be, at the same time, “practical and visionary”; and finally recalled (or rather conjured up) Henry Luce’s famous dictum of 1941: “America is the intellectual, scientific and artistic capital of the world”: the nation which was creating, and would more and more shape, embody, and sum up the triumphs of the twentieth century, as well as, we should add, its ambiguities, vices, and failures – since we are not allowed to forget that Luce’s predicament was pronounced only a few weeks before Pearl Harbor.

The Exhibition, whose splendid catalogue, edited by Barbara Haskell, bore Anderson’s “Foreword,” was on view in its two phases (1900-1950

and 1950-2000) for a whole nine months. Less than two years after its conclusion, the trauma of September 11 forced us all, Americans and non-Americans, to adjust ourselves to a completely different interpretation of a century which had evidently closed its days paving the way for a series of crucial events, largely unpredictable (or, to be more precise, and honest, how *really* unpredictable?), ominously lurking – and hastening to unfold – in its immediate aftermath.

Political historians and scholars of American society tend to investigate the origins, the reasons, as well as the symbolic implications, of the tragic crumbling of the Twin Towers, and, with it, of the idea of an American supremacy that would outlive the end of the American century, whereas cultural historians prefer to concentrate on the various, contradictory features of the twentieth century, wondering why and how could it be defined American *tout court*. Was it American because it was the “short century”? because – within the context and at the peak of consumerism – it was “consumed” at an obsessively accelerated pace, following the impulsive/compulsive rhythm of a largely still immature nation? Had it been “exceptionally” short as a natural consequence of American exceptionalism? And, if that was the case, how could that be if not only the close of the century, but its last decades as well, had seen historians and writers of different backgrounds refuse and refute the very idea of American exceptionalism, acknowledging the fact that most of the promises conceived at the turn into the twentieth century had remained clamorously unfulfilled?

How could the United States, in shameless pride, give its name to a century which began with the assassination of its twenty-fifth president, William McKinley, which saw its withdrawal from the Society of Nations (and the consequent dangerous isolationism after World War One), the Great Depression, the victory in World War Two and, after that, an intricacy of hot and cold wars, the transformation of the largest free market in the world from an exporting into an importing country, the rise of an enormous national debt, the killing of John and Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King in a handful of years, and the disaster in Viet Nam? In a word, what sort of century did the United States create, if it was its most blatant overall output?

Should we all, Americans and non-Americans, be happy that the Amer-

ican century (contrary to Alfred McCoy's prophecy which envisaged the end of the American supremacy only by 2025) is over and that America shows no sign (in spite of what candidates to Presidency tend to say in their pre-electoral rhetoric) of being able to regain an economical leadership, the function of a model for the rest of the world, of the source of all novelties, of training ground of all major experimentations, and promoter of numberless, more and more progressive eras?

The Annual Interdisciplinary Seminar of American Studies, co-sponsored by the Italian Association for North American Studies, the Fulbright Commission, and the Center for American Studies in Rome, was organized in May 2012 to discuss these, and several other, equally crucial questions. Its title ("Turning in and out of the American Century") invited, and in fact produced, a lively texture of debates in three different directions: the transition from nineteenth to twentieth century; the fragmented, centrifugal end of the twentieth century, with its explosions and implosions, its bangs and whimpers; and, in between, the multifaceted notion of the American century *per se*, its narrations of stories and counter-stories, and the emergence of a strong counter-history of ancient and recent events.

The nineteenth century vanished anticipating the first manifestations of what W. H. Auden later described as "anxiety" (*The Age of Anxiety*, 1948), experiencing fears that covered and involved all aspects of human life and society, such as women's (and men's) anxieties about the new centrality of sex, the hard relationship between a gratifying career and a well balanced family life, the monstrous spectre of monopoly, and so forth. It forced writers, men and women of letters, thinkers, and politicians, to act strenuously, but – perhaps even more than at the turn into the twenty-first century and in Almodóvar's times – always on the verge of a nervous breakdown (see Gianfranca Balestra's essay). A few decades later, in the course of the Depression Era, the fear of fear spread all over the country and was successfully, universally exported. And if, in the second half of the century, the commitment to an American way of life was considered the winning force of the American century, the demands of conformity to that ideal were counterbalanced by the fear of it.

The theme of fear, in fact, dominated the century from the very beginning, and the various solutions against existential doubts, new versions of

the age old American uneasiness, and collective obsessions, were, in general, short lived and inadequate. It would be interesting, from this point of view, to investigate the cultural and symbolic importance of the shift from George Santayana's "animal faith" – through John M. Keynes's "animal spirits" and the tension of poets in favor of a post-humanist agenda, which would include animal "selves" within the human self (see Marina Camboni's essay) – to Jackson Lears's "animal spirits revisited"; or, to put it differently, from the theory of Manifest Destiny, through the capitalist sublime, to the various forms of "emotional capitalism" which, in our times, try to manipulate our affections in order to advance corporate interests. A similar pattern seems to surface when we try to understand, and to reconstruct, the itinerary which accompanies cultural historians and literary critics from the discourse of immigration, through the doctrine of assimilation, to contemporary multiculturalism and the renewed interest in migrant literatures and in all forms of narratives of exile. This occurs especially when we do not limit ourselves to a sociological or ideological approach and, in the age of cultural translation, we realize that these phenomena reflect themselves in genres, styles, and increasingly sophisticated linguistic strategies (see Linda Carpio's essay).

Perhaps, for the time being, it is safe enough to say, in due consideration of the numberless shades and nuances implied in such a wide object of analysis, that the history of the three crucial moments which were the subject of the Seminar regularly coincides with the stories that were told by their protagonists. And that, among these protagonists, we should include not only historical figures, men and women in flesh and blood, but also concepts and ideas, doctrines and fashions, private tastes and public opinions, as modernism, modernity, postmodernism, imperialism, the clash of civilizations and the war on terrorism acquire the stature of characters in a complex *mise-en-scène*, where principles, practices, and ideals become great actors interpreting never-ending conflicts among contrasting forces. So much so that historians, scholars of American culture, observers of contemporary society, and literary critics wonder whether what they see staged before them is a product of their construction or, rather, the staging of the eternal, cyclical production of an "outer" reality which exists apart from their efforts to understand and judge it.

The essays which are published in the present issue of *RSA Journal* do not, obviously, represent the totality and the variety of perspectives which, thanks to the scholars invited to participate, stimulated the select audience of fifty Ph.D. students convening from a dozen Italian universities, but certainly offer a concrete example of the ways in which the three major themes implied in the general title of the Seminar could be addressed. As it regularly happens when the subject of a conference is well chosen, and meets the demands and the expectations of a well informed and sincerely motivated public, all presentations (in particular the four papers that were the sources of the essays published here) proved to be significant in ways that exceeded and expanded the occasional focus of the debate, stirring up large waves of resonance and significant echoes in our minds, alerting the intellects and the sensibilities of us all, embarrassed, but attentive, watchful and responsive inhabitants of the twenty-first – non-American, yet, perhaps, not entirely un-American – century.