

essay

Rethinking the War on American Culture

by Salman Rushdie

A couple of years ago a British literary festival staged a public debate on the motion that "it is the duty of every European to resist American culture." Along with two American journalists (one of whom was Sidney Blumenthal, now more famous as a Clinton aide and impeachment witness), I opposed the motion. I'm happy to report that we won, capturing roughly 60 percent of the audience's vote.

But it was an odd sort of victory. My American co-panelists were surprised by the strength of the audience's anti-Americanism -- after all, 40 percent of the crowd had voted for the motion. Sidney, noting that "American culture" as represented by American armed forces had liberated Europe from Nazism not all that many years ago, was puzzled by the audience's apparent lack of gratitude. And there was a residual feeling that the case for "resistance" was actually pretty strong.

Since that day, the debate about cultural globalization and its military-political sidekick, intervention, has continued to intensify, and anti-American sentiment is, if anything, on the increase. In most people's heads, globalization has come to mean the worldwide triumph of Nike, the Gap

and MTV. My American co-panelists were surprised by the strength of the audience's anti-Americanism -- after all, 40 percent of the crowd had voted for the motion. Sidney, noting that "American culture" as represented by American armed forces had liberated Europe from Nazism not all that many years ago, was puzzled by the audience's apparent lack of gratitude. And there was a residual feeling that the case for "resistance" was actually pretty strong.

Confusingly, we want these goods and services when we behave as consumers, but with our cultural hats on we have begun to deplore their omnipresence. On the merits of intervention, even greater confusion reigns. We don't seem to know if we want a world policeman or not. If the "international community," which these days is little more than a euphemism for the United States, fails to intervene promptly in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, it is exonerated for that failure. Elsewhere, it is criticized just as vehemently when it does intervene: when American bombs fall on Iraq, or when American agents assist in the capture of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan.

Clearly, those of us who shelter un-

der the pax Americana are deeply ambiguous about it, and the United States will no doubt continue to be surprised by the level of the world's ingratitude. The globalizing power of American culture is opposed by an improbable alliance that includes everyone from cultural-relativist liberals to hard-line fundamentalists, with all manner of pluralists and individualists, to say nothing of flag-waving nationalists and splintering sectarians, in between.

Much ecological concern is presently being expressed about the crisis in biodiversity, the possibility that a fifth or more of the earth's species of living forms may soon become extinct. To some, globalization is an equivalent social catastrophe, with equally alarming implications for the survival of

true cultural diversity, of the world's precious localness: the Indianness of India, the Frenchness of France.

Amid this din of global defensiveness, little thought is given to some of the most important questions raised by a phenomenon that, like it or not, isn't going away any time soon.

For instance: do cultures actually exist as separate, pure, defensible entities? Is not mélange, adulteration, impurity, pick'n'mix at the heart of the idea of the modern, and hasn't it been that way for most of this all-shook-up century? Doesn't the idea of pure cultures, in urgent need of being kept free from alien contamination, lead us inexorably toward apartheid, toward ethnic cleansing, toward the gas chamber?

Or, to put it another way: are there other universals besides international conglomerates and the interests of superpowers? And if by chance there were a universal value that might, for the sake of argument, be called "freedom," whose enemies -- tyranny, bigotry, intolerance, fanaticism -- were the enemies of us all; and if this "freedom" were discovered to exist in greater quantity in the countries of the West than anywhere else on earth; and if, in the world as it actually exists, rather than in some unattainable Utopia, the authority of the United States were the best current guarantor of that "freedom," then might it not follow that to oppose the spread of American culture would be to take up arms against the wrong foe?

By agreeing on what we are against, we discover what we are for. André Malraux believed that the third millennium must be the age of religion.

I would say rather that it must be the age in which we finally grow out of our need for religion. But to cease to believe in our gods is not the same thing as commencing to believe in nothing.

There are fundamental freedoms to fight for, and it will not do to doom the terrorized women of Afghanistan or of the circumcision-happy lands of Africa by calling their oppression their "culture."

And of course it is America's duty not to abuse its pre-eminence, and it is our right to criticize such abuses when they happen -- when, for example, innocent factories in Sudan are bombed, or Iraqi civilians pointlessly killed.

But perhaps we, too, need to rethink our easy condemnations. Sneakers, burgers, blue jeans and music videos aren't the enemy. If the young people of Iran now insist on rock concerts, who are we to criticize their cultural contamination? Out there are real tyrants to defeat. Let's keep our eyes on the prize. Salman Rushdie is the author of "The Satanic Verses," "The Moor's Last Sigh" and the forthcoming "The Ground Beneath Her Feet." *NYT*

trend

Science Fiction in English Literature

by A S M Nurunnabi

SCIENCE fiction occupies a significant place in English literature. Science fiction comprises stories which are set in the future, or in which the contemporary setting is disrupted by an imaginary device such as a new invention or the introduction of an alien being. Stories of this kind are distinguished from other kinds of fantastic narrative by the claim that they respect the limits of scientific possibility, and that their innovations are plausible extrapolation from modern theory and technology, though relatively few examples are generally conscientious in this respect.

Although elements of science fiction appear in many stories of imaginary voyages, it was not until the 19th century that the advancement of science began to inspire a good deal of work in this vein. Science fictional themes play a significant part in the work of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The influence of Jules Verne helped to popularise tales of imaginary tourism involving hypothetical flying machines, submarines and spaceships. Speculation about the future was also encouraged by movements for political reform and by ideas drawn from the theory of evolution. These various threads were drawn together when science fiction came briefly into vogue in the late 19th century. By far the most

ambitious and successful author of this period was H G Wells whose fertile imagination was fired by Thomas Henry Huxley's lectures on biology and by his fervent socialism. He produced a series of classic scientific romances, including 'The Time Machine', 'The Island of Dr Moreau', 'The Invisible Man', 'The War of the Worlds', 'When the Sleeper Wakes', 'The First Men on the Moon' and 'The War in the Air'.

This was the time when the entire world-view of traditional religion seemed to have crumbled away, to be replaced by a scientific perspective in which the earth was a tiny atom in an infinite universe and man's domination was but a brief moment in an earthly history extending billions of years. Many of Wells's contemporaries in the genre were sons of clergymen converted to free thought.

World War I had a profound effect on

British futuristic fiction, and in the period between the wars British scientific romance was dominated by the idea that a new war could and probably would obliterate civilisation, plunging mankind into a new dark age. A frequent corollary of this notion was that he must ultimately be replaced by a new species which had transcended his innate brutality.

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The USA, by contrast, was relatively untouched by World War I; its futuristic fictions were haunted by no such anxieties. Interplanetary fiction, which played very minor role in British scientific romance, enjoyed something of a vogue in America, largely due to the example of Edgar Rice Burroughs, who used other planets as settings for gaudy adventure stories. These stories embodied a mood of buoyant self-confidence that was current in America at the time. This new genre of writers were not the

least anxious about the possible destruction of civilisation and no need to imagine new species to replace mankind: in their futures the powers of human creativity deployed in new technologies would make men equal to all possible challenges if only they were careful enough, and would enable homo Sapiens to conquer the universe.

American science fiction remained naive in tone until the mid-1930s, but anxieties bred by the depression combined to encourage a more sober and realistic approach. A new generation of writers brought a measure of intellectual sophistication to science fiction while retaining its imaginative fertility and adventurousness.

After World War II the British tradition of scientific romance petered out its last notable practitioners being C S Lewis and Gerald Heard. Its pessimistic tone, further encouraged by Hiroshima,

culminated in such bleak works as George Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty Four' and Aldous Huxley's 'Ape and Essence'. The most successful of the British post-war writers of science fiction, Arthur C Clarke is more strongly affiliated to the American optimistic tradition.

In the USA, the popularity of science fiction increased dramatically with the advent of paperbacks and there was a gradual shift from the short-story form towards novels and, eventually, novel series. Most of the best writers of the 1950s — notably Kingsley Amis — argued that science fiction works best in short-story form because its strengths lie with the ingenious development of ideas rather than with the elaborate characterisation that longer works require.

The mid-1960s saw in both Britain and the USA a modish experimental phase in the development of science

fiction. Before 1965 science fiction was read mostly by young men, but the feminist movement in America generated a new interest in the possibilities of reform in the area of sexual politics and several new female writers became prominent in the genre in the 1970s. The situation has been lately complicated by a resurgence of interest in horror fiction.

The boundaries of science fiction are now more difficult to outline than ever before. Lately there has been a considerable evolution of science fiction from the days when it was virtually an esoteric literary cult, its imagery has now diffused throughout contemporary culture to become in some measure familiar to everyone. This familiarity has not entirely eroded the contempt in which science fiction was held when it was absurdly gaudy species of pulp fiction, but it has enabled some writers and individual works to escape stigmatization, and has helped make the products of the scientific imagination available to reputable writers. The difficulty of achieving elaborate characterisation and density of environmental detail in futuristic and hypothetical settings still prevents even the best science fiction novels from living up to the expectations of traditionally minded literary critics.

column: Parisien Portrait

A Little-known Gem

by Raana Haider

"Crushing display of showy wealth." Emile Zola

EVERYONE but everyone has been to the Louvre. Almost everyone has been to Musée d'Orsay. Yet few even know of the Jacquemart-André Museum. The comment of Emile Zola, the French writer on the sumptuous Parisian mansion of Edouard André and Nelly Jacquemart built late in the nineteenth century is all that and more. It is an enchanting and dazzling architectural gem.

Once again the vision of Napoleon III and the genius of Baron Haussmann combined to extend the aristocratic residential quartiers of rive droite (the 6th and the 7th arrondissements) to the newly-developed areas of the 8th. The new road system radiating from l'Étoile became part of the Napoleonic legend. (See 'Living in the 16th'.) Leading Parisian political and financial figures constructed palatial residences along these broad avenues. The inhabitants of these sumptuous mansions were known as 'napoleoniades' to use the expression of the day. A large number of the owners of the opulent buildings were members of the imperial aristocracy. It was a matter of social prestige as the opening of each new mansion became a major Parisian social event.

In 1868, Edouard André bought the property at 158 Boulevard Haussmann for his future home and construction was completed in 1875. The project was

assigned to a popular architect of the day, Henri Parent. He created an aristocratic residence in a modern city: not simply reviving past styles but incorporating a contemporary lifestyle. The building is one of the finest specimen of Napoleon III Empire architecture — a harmonious symmetrical facade in pure classical style. The location of the building itself is unique. It stands on elevated ground and thus the facade is visible to all passing by. The entrance to the mansion is through a gate that follows a ramp into a driveway and an inner courtyard facing the inner facade of the building. A stone and cast iron porch greeted people as another gate at the other end of the driveway saw them out. Moving partition walls operated by hydraulic jacks concealed in the basement allowed for small intimate gatherings as well as grand balls.

The piece de resistance is the innovative and magnificent staircase. At the far end of the salons, the monumental stairway occupies a small space set against the wall. A tightly-knit double 'S' shaped staircase in intricate black and gold iron-wrought railings soars to the upper floor. Parent's creativity bore fruit in this masterpiece after he was not selected for the design of the new opera house. His rival, Charles Garnier won that prestigious honour. Garnier's opera house and its stairway are architectural landmarks. Private rooms are located upstairs and the public salons at ground floor level. The day after the

private mansion was inaugurated, it was hailed. "The press unanimously applauded the residence as an unrivaled masterpiece." The 'International Herald Tribune' has attributed French style to the following: "elegance is achieved through simplicity, discretion, a touch of eccentricity and a respect for history.... Atmospheric rather than correct, not so much decoration as personal expression." That just about sums it up.

Edouard André, the son of a Protestant banker and heir to a vast fortune, was a member of Napoleon III's imperial guards. Further advancement in a military career was closed to him due to his poor health. Materially endowed, he became a patron of the arts and an avid art collector. In 1881, he married Nelly Jacquemart, a Catholic artist from a middle-class family. The union of different backgrounds resulted in an extraordinary union of a passion for the arts. Edouard André died in 1894 and Nelly Jacquemart in 1912. They had no children. Upon her death, she bequeathed their superb mansion and its priceless contents to the Institut de

France. After three years of extensive renovation and restoration work in the early 1990s, the Musée Jacquemart-André reopened to the public.

So armed with an audio-guide, I did the tour. The autumn day I visited the museum, there was hardly anyone around. In a short while, I realized I was often the only one in a room. One could, almost, imagine being an occupant of such exquisite surroundings. A perfectly polished parquet floor, warm and inviting wall-colours, non-intimidating décor and non-intimidating-sized rooms, every priceless item well-placed and the furniture and furnishings 'all-just-so-right' creates a luxurious yet cosy ambience. One can imagine people actually living here.

In an article, 'All that Glittered' by Dominick Dunne in an issue of 'Vanity Fair', Dunne wrote about the recent auction sale of the contents of the Chateau de Groussay near Paris. In his visit to the Chateau, he felt as I did on my visit to the Musée Jacquemart-André. He wrote, "Rarely have the sensations of 'grand' and 'cosy' been so artfully united. The place is masterpiece of

comfort, inviting you to linger in each room, sit in all the chairs (hardly) and stare at the pictures on the walls, hung one above the other from floor to ceiling...."

The immense collection of works of art is testimony to the husband and wife joint venture. Here are paintings by Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Watteau, Fragonard, Prudhon, Joshua Reynolds, Delacroix, Ingres and others; Greek and Roman sculptures; Limoges porcelain; and Italian Renaissance works of art by Botticelli, Bellini, Donatello, Tiepolo and others. A smoking-room is filled with oriental pieces of art — Chinese porcelain jars and furniture, Korean cloisonné enamel urns, Moroccan tables, a mosque enamel lamp. Not all purchases at the time were recognised works. Many were simply buys of a 'good eye' — like all good collectors — and today are treasures.

The famed ceiling fresco by the Italian artist Tiepolo adorning the upper section of the main staircase of the Musée Jacquemart-André was acquired by the French connoisseurs of Italian art in 1894. They bought the fresco for 30,000 Italian liras, a handsome sum in the day. It had originally adorned the villa Contarini in Venice. The fresco by Tiepolo depicts Henry III being received at the villa Contarini. Another Tiepolo fresco graces the ceiling of the present-day café Jacquemart-André. The Louvre Museum held a lecture in early 1999 on the restoration of these frescoes of

ambattista Tiepolo that had been executed in 1745. These two frescoes are the only works of the master artist in France.

The Institut de France rents the venue for prestigious cocktails and receptions. We had the good fortune to be invited to such a reception at the Musée Jacquemart-André. Not often do Commerce and the Arts collaborate so successfully. We were invited for an evening of amusements of the eighteenth century. (The building itself was only built late in the nineteenth century — but never mind.) As we entered the portico, there were men and women dressed in period costumes welcoming us. Inside, a more admirable setting cannot be imagined. The warmth and richness of the décor was illuminated by the many candelabra and chandeliers. A bewigged violin player here and an imperial couple danced there. There was gaiety and glamour all around. We were transported to another century — a period of *la finesse et la beaute*. It was a magical evening.

The French spirit includes a love of the decorative arts and a passion for the art of living. The fruit of such a spirit can be found at the Musée Jacquemart-André. It was an American, Henry James in 'Parisian Sketches' who remarked, "The French have always flattened themselves that they gave gone further in the art of living, in what they call *l'entente de la vie*, than any other people."