

Introduction: Editor's Note

Jay Ruby

It is a rare and often startling experience to see ourselves as others do, an experience that is always challenging and often causes us to examine ourselves and our society. The perspective Western Europeans have about America fascinated us even before de Tocqueville arrived on our shores.

Europeans have long regarded the United States as a sociocultural experiment—a new society, or a laboratory where they can watch others trying to construct a new society. As Pachter suggests, "The history of foreign observation of the United States is . . . the history not only of our society, and of international reaction to it, but of the dilemma of modernism itself" (1976:xii).

The growth of our cities, the settling of the West, Native Americans, the lack of tradition as an inhibitor of change, our attempts to be a melting pot, the transformation of former slaves and other minorities into citizens are recurring themes in reports by Europeans. These observers are behaving like ethnographers, transforming us into objects of study whose mores need to be described and explained. At times their conclusions appear to us to fluctuate between romantic naïveté, in which we are perceived as living in a Golden Utopia representing the future, and a hypercriticism based on our seeming unwillingness or inability to perpetuate our European heritage. Whether or not their remarks are accurate, their points of view provide us with an almost ancestral reflection on our society.

Our knowledge of European views of America is by and large confined to the printed word. Travel literature from the eighteenth century to the present has been translated, anthologized, critiqued, and sometimes incorporated into Americans' formal education. Unfortunately, a comparable amount of time and energy has not been devoted to gaining an understanding of the visual images Europeans have created of us. The material is vast—beginning with the first expeditions to the New World—and is to be found in virtually every visual medium. Hugh Honour's seminal work, *European Visions of America* (1975), aptly demonstrates the rewards of making a study and presentation of these materials.

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The incredibly rich and complex output of European photographers, filmmakers, and television producers has not only been neglected by American scholars and critics, but the works themselves have been virtually unseen in this country. Most people know Robert Frank's *The Americans* (1957)—and its impact on the ways in which we see ourselves as well as its influence on an entire generation of American and European photographers. Few of us—even those professionally interested in photography—can name other European photographers who have contributed to Europe's understanding of America through photographs. Photographs are fundamentally different from pictorial representations of the U.S.A. prior to 1850.

The European visual image of America was created largely by artists who never went there. . . . Similarly, the literary image of America was partly the creation of writers who never crossed the Atlantic. . . . This vision, conjured up from fact and fantasy, taking its form from Europe and only its coloring from America, accounts for several misconceptions which still survive. Yet it has its own artistic validity as the expression of European dreams of a terrestrial paradise or of a Golden Age, an exotic world where everything is strange and bright, the setting for tales of adventure and for an ideal society. [Honour 1975:14]

Photographers cannot imagine America. They have to come here to create their visions, to confront their personal expectations and fantasies with the actuality in front of their eyes. They come to us as the witnesses of their own vision.

In this issue of *Studies in Visual Communication* we explore America as seen by a pictorialist, E. O. Hoppé, a German-born photographer who spent most of his professional life making portraits in London (see Jay's essay, this issue). Twice Hoppé journeyed to the United States—in 1919 and again in 1926. On both occasions he ventured out of his studio to photograph our cities and countryside for a travel book appropriately titled *Romantic America* (see Gidley, this issue).

In the 1930s, when German photography was flourishing (see Becker's essay, this issue), Bernd Lohse and Harald Lechenperg, along with many other photojournalists, came to the United States looking not so much for the picturesque or the romantic landscape, but to capture the life and pulse of modern America. With their "miniature" cameras, as 35-mm cameras were called then, they captured another vision of America and in the process changed the way American journalism would tell its stories.

Their work provides us with a chance to see three ways in which America was "constructed" through the eyes of three European photographers. The reflections are worth contemplating.

During the 1985 International Conference on Visual Communication, the photographs of Emil O. Hoppé, Bernd Lohse, and Harald Lechenperg will be exhibited at the Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. The exhibit, "Images of the U.S.A.: 1920–1940—Three European Photographers," was curated by Jay Ruby. It was made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the support of the Arthur Ross Gallery and the Office of the President of the University of Pennsylvania. The exhibit, the conference, and the journal are activities of The Annenberg School of Communications.

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