

**Nilsen Sarah, *Projecting America, 1958. Film and cultural diplomacy at the Brussels World's Fair,***

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"AMERICAN FILMS WERE doing too good a job of telling the story of freedom to people everywhere... American films have been called ambassadors for democracy" (Nilsen, 2011: 52). While this can be considered the best paragraph in comprising Nilsen's ideas on the subject, it is also the unfolding beginning of an exquisite journey into the intricate American cultural diplomacy during the unstable era of the Cold War. Such a journey is perfectly delineated in her book, *Projecting America, 1958. Film and cultural diplomacy at the Brussels World's Fair*.

Sarah Nielsen is currently an Associate Professor, teaching at the University of Vermont, United States of America. She is giving classes in areas such as: "history of film and television, on issues of race, class and gender in the media, the theories of popular culture, and critical race theory". Although fairly unknown in the world of authors, it is important to note her interest in cultural diplomacy and the popular culture during the Cold War, which can be easily traced in her astonishing book. Furthermore, her other noteworthy presentations in this area (which will be later summarized in her book) include: "*Popular Culture and the Cold War*" (*University of Wisconsin, 2001*), "America's Salesman: Walt Disney's USA in Circarama" (McFarland, 2010).

As Nilsen put it, "this book examines the efficacy of film as an element of political persuasion in a free and democratic society" (8). Nilsen's book revolves around the event of 1958, Brussels World's Fair, a moment in the consciousness of the American psychological warfare, fighting to overcome the negative effects of the Soviet propaganda and the influence of the Hollywood cinema on the European viewers (quite contradicting, since it came from the core of the American society). In addition, Nielsen's book largely presents the mentality of a nation, striving to win on every battlefield, and thus make use of the American culture as a form of diplomacy.

Nilsen's aim in the above mentioned book is closely linked to the argument of the American manifestation in the Europeans' perception through the import of carefully prepared propagandistic motion pictures, mainly focused to portray the success of the democratic and capitalist American way of life. She is set to explain why certain films were chosen and what implications they had on an ideological level. Nilsen's work is the answer to the question she poses in the Introduction: "What was the impact of the USIA (United States Information Agency) films on shaping and changing people's perceptions of America and its role in the global community?" (Nilsen, 2011: 25).

*Projecting America, 1958. Film and cultural diplomacy at the Brussels World's Fair* is a kaleidoscope of culture, society, history and the psychology of the Cold War. Since such an amalgam might create confusion, Nilsen's study on the subject prepares the reader a great surprise. Not only is she structuring her book to give an insight on every method of soft power used by the Americans during the World's Fair and the reaction of the European participants, but every chapter is also accompanied by a historical summary of the events prior to the Fair. Accordingly, the author achieves a well-rounded effect in conceptualising her ideas, avoiding any misunderstandings. Her arguments are clearly constructed and testified by a vast amount of research, an element that can be very well observed in the bibliography at the end of the book. This does not strain the reader's attention in pursuing the extremely detailed book; on the contrary – it tempts him to turn on the pages breathlessly.

Many may wonder about the issues behind American motion pictures and the need to conceive others. The problem with the Hollywood is that the average European viewer is firstly acquainted with the American lifestyle through those films, and the common view is that Americans are inherently violent, sexually promiscuous and indebted to the culture of materialism. Reinhold Wagnleitner (Austrian Professor from the Department of History at the University of Salzburg) argues in an article that: "all the accusations [were] against the civilization of the United States [as a] thin veil for crass materialism and general lack of culture" (Wagnleitner, 1992: 10). Hence has come to life U.S. Information Agency (USIA), a propaganda instrument meant to re-educate the general public into knowing the other sides of America, mainly the best ones, and to counterattack its malicious Soviet opponent – "Hollywood, per definition, also became one of the most powerful weapons of the anticommunist propaganda offensive" (Wagnleitner, 1992: 11).

Nilsen gives a very comprehensive description about this aspect, especially in the Preface and Introduction. She gives arguments extensively on the great discrepancy between the films before the birth of the USIA and the censored motion pictures resulted for the Brussels World's Fair (information beautifully exposed in Chapter 1).

The American pavilion has been, without any doubt, spectacular in its own mag-

nitude. Contrary to the USSR pavilion – which had chosen the theme of technology and power, the Americans presented the domestic universe of the nuclear family. Their choice, certainly, produced a far better impression in the eyes of the European visitors.

However, the Associate Professor evokes in her book the influence of the films, music and design, rather than the impression of the pavilion. Therefore, her next chapters are filled with depictions of the main attractions, followed by their in-depth understanding. For instance, her second chapter deals with “The USA in Circarama”, a Walt Disney production. Probably her most vivid chapter throughout the book, as a reader, you are easily transported back in April 1958 to witness Disney’s “recreation of the emigrant journey into the Promised Land of American bounty and leisure” (Nilsen, 2011: 76). This would have been a plain adventure, have it not been exposed on an immense 360-degree screen, surrounding the viewer with the sheer feel of America! Needless to say, Disney’s film has been a hit.

Likewise, in Chapter 3, related to the film “South Pacific”, Nilsen provides awareness into the bizarre fascination of the Nuclear explosions (at some point, even oozing erotic charges). The Nuclear mushroom is sharply illustrated in the beginning of the film: “the island of Balai Hai, which serves as the edenic core of the film, looms ominously on the ocean horizon, enveloped in both a polychromatic spectacle of Technicolor and a mushroom cloud halo of deep reds, oranges, and pinks” (Nilsen, 2011: 101). This perspective is absolutely linked to the common fear of the possible Nuclear war, yet it has inflicted a general “negative pleasure” (as Kant describes the sublime) into the viewer.

Chapter 4 certifies the European tendency towards the typical American film, since the film “The Touch of Evil” has been nothing but the representation of an uncensored Hollywood type film, which actually proved to be another great success. The reason lies in the European audience preconceptions for perceiving Americans as materialistic and violent and the film reinforced their opinions.

In chapter 5, the author is concerned about the Avant-garde cinema, promoted by Shirley Clarke. She exhibits a handful of loops of short films. While the chapter is intertwined with the influence of Jazz music in Europe, it is also dedicated to the issues of racial discrimination, which remained unsolved in the United States in that particular moment.

Lastly, chapter 6 mentions designers’ products, associating art with pragmatism, as the pavilion’s theme has had most to do with domestic life. Nilsen informs us that: “the most important entry and overwhelming winner of the show were the molded plywood chairs developed by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen, who were teaching art at the Cranbrook Academy of Art” (Nilsen, 2011:158). Moreover, Charles Eames and his brother have had their own film contribution: “Information Machine: Creative Man and the Data

Processor”, appointed to change the common perception that computers would control the human; rather, the computer would be just a tool.

In my view, Sarah Nilsen’s book is extraordinary in her own style and her appreciation of the Cold War’s American Cultural Diplomacy. It creates such visuals of the details that you are completely drawn into the event, overwhelmed by the American lifestyle, mentality and capitalism. The American family eventually becomes your family in the uncertain world of the Communist threat. Nonetheless, the only drawback that can be found is that her work is short. At 200 pages, one might wish to know more about other European nations’ opinions on the event, since she mentions the Germans and French.

All in all, *Projecting America, 1958. Film and cultural diplomacy at the Brussels World’s Fair* by Sarah Nilsen is possibly among one of the most wonderful demonstrations of cultural diplomacy in the history of Cold War. Her research can be easily recommended for anyone who is interested into the dynamics behind culture as public diplomacy, as well as the contact between two different characters in history, namely the Americans and the Europeans, in the name of freedom and democracy.

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## References

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Wagnleitner R (April, 1992), *American Cultural Diplomacy, the Cinema, and the Cold War in Central Europe*. Working Papers in Austrian Studies (92-4): 1-19.

Sarah Nilsen’s public profile at the University of Vermont’s site.

Available at: <http://www.uvm.edu/~fts/?Page=SarahNilsen.php>. (accessed 15th March 2013)

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