

E. Christian Kopff

Europe and America in Whit Stillman's *Barcelona*

“Amerika, du hast es besser!” Goethe exclaimed. For him America was a land free from the ancient traditions that are Europe’s heritage and curse. For once, however, the wise German got it wrong. The two continents named after Amerigo Vespucci are dominated by a culture which was imported from Europe and is expressed in European tongues and nourished and maintained by contact with Europe. D. H. Lawrence wanted Americans to turn their back on Europe and embrace Amerindian cultures. Americans of European descent have rarely done so. American religion, politics, literature and art began in Europe and Americans have returned there to seek the sources of these traditions. Sometimes they stay for only a few years, like Augustus Saint-Gaudens or Margaret Fuller. Others remain, like T. S. Eliot and Henry James, who devoted influential novels to telling about innocent Americans who confront the culture, sophistication, and corruption of Europe.

Dodsworth, Sinclair Lewis’s variation on this theme, began as a novel, was then turned into a Broadway play, and finally became a movie (with script by Sidney Howard). *Dodsworth* is not only one of the finest films

to come out of thirties’ Hollywood, it also gave Walter Huston his most satisfying role (reprising his famous Broadway performance). In the film, Mr. Dodsworth is a successful manufacturer of high quality automobiles. His wife persuades him to sell his business to a larger firm so that they can enjoy the fruits of his financial success. They travel to England (“Mother England,” he exclaims as he catches his first glimpse of her from his cruise ship) and then on to Europe. They find cultured and elegant people, but also corruption and immorality. The Dodsworths left a hard-working, industrial America for a Europe that is a playground for the very wealthy. At first the playground’s worst vice seems to be an innocent snobbishness. The games soon turn immoral and treacherous, however. Mrs. Dodsworth, captivated by European society, does not want to admit her age, and this vanity leads her first into lying and then to worse. Her self-deception and her attempts to deceive others drag her down and threaten to destroy her husband. He is

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alienated because he has been separated from his job, which is his vocation. First his marriage and then his life go downhill until he meets a woman who teaches him who he really is and he decides to return to America to start working again.

The protagonists of Whit Stillman's *Barcelona* are young men at the start of their careers and they have gone to Europe to work. Europe in the 1980's, "the last decade of the Cold War," as the opening title calls it, is as enticing and immoral as it was for the Dodsworths in the 1920's. In both movies life in Europe represents a rite of passage which teaches the American his vocation and introduces him to the right woman.

Ted Boynton and Fred Boynton come from an America which is no longer the isolationist, protectionist haven of the 1920's. America in the 1980's is the propagator of global free trade. Her fleets and armies roam the world, opposing Communism and defending America's allies. Ted is a businessman and Fred is a naval officer, but success for both young men requires a tour in Europe. Ted explains the difference between Europe and America: "This is the way I see it. Work is better in the U. S. Living is better in Barcelona. The question is, what's more important—life or work? Obviously, work." *

Ted Boynton is smart. He scored a perfect 1600 on his SATs and got into an Ivy League college. He moved from success in the sales division of his company to become head of its European operations. His hero is the company's CEO, Jack Tyrrell, who rescued the company from ruin. Jack, a war hero in World War II, worked with "Wild Bill" Donovan to found the OSS, which

later became the CIA. Into Ted's busy professional and less active social life arrives one rainy evening his cousin, Fred. Fred is a junior officer in the U. S. Sixth Fleet. His SAT scores were abysmal and he went, by his own account, to a "not-so-selective school." After failure on Wall Street, Fred joined the navy (ROTC) and has arrived as an advance man for a visit to Barcelona by the Sixth Fleet.

Success and failure in both career and romance turn on language. So Fred has a question for his better-educated cousin:

Maybe you could clarify something for me. While I've been, you know, waiting for the fleet to show up, I read a lot and one thing that keeps cropping up is this thing about 'subtext.' Songs, novels, plays—they all have a subtext, which I take to mean a hidden message or import of some kind. So subtext we know. But what do you call the meaning, or message, that's right there on the surface, completely open and obvious. What do you call what's above the subtext?

Ted answers, "The text." Fred pauses and then proceeds, "Okay. That's right.... But they never talk about that." With this exchange, *Barcelona* invites the modern viewer—so intent on dissecting depth and irony—to pay attention to the value of the straightforward text.

Jack Tyrrell saved his company from insolvency by reading and understanding the meaning that is right there on the surface, as Ted explains to the attractive trade-show girl, Montserrat. "The truth is that Illinois High-Speed Motor's motors were no longer very fast. Jack re-focused IHSMOCO on what he saw as its real business. 'This means motors and they must be fast,' he would say." Two people understand Jack's point, Ted and the young head of marketing, Dickie Taylor. Jack plans to turn the company over to them instead of the older people in the firm or to an outsider, "with no idea what makes IHSMOCO

*I quote here and hereafter from Stillman's shooting script, which was published in *Barcelona and Metropolitan: Tales of Two Cities* (Faber and Faber, 1994).

so extraordinary,” as Dickie puts it, because Ted and Dickie understand that what makes the company so extraordinary is a literal reading of its name. It is a High-Speed Motor Company that makes fast motors.

Ted’s cousin, Fred, uses language to cover his trail of blunders and faux pas with his vivid imagination, like Mrs. Dodsworth. He invents stories to explain away his past

Americans. In each case, Ramon explains the acts as “provocations” masterminded by the CIA. As Montserrat tells Ted, Ramon “had read the works of Philip Agee and so was an expert on the American CIA and its involvement in the internal affairs of every country.” Ramon’s ideologically motivated publication of Fred’s reckless boasting leads to the attack on Fred. Ramon’s apology is typical of both men.



Ted Boynton (left) and Fred Boynton (right) are two Americans abroad in Whit Stillman’s film *Barcelona*.

failures and to enliven his present chances of female companionship, never noticing the damage he is causing until it is too late. He explains why he invented a story which sabotages Ted’s relationship with Montserrat. “You’re in a conversation, it has this momentum, you want to tell the other person interesting or funny things, and you end up telling things that, on reflection, maybe you shouldn’t.” He tries to impress his girlfriend Marta by telling her that he works for the CIA. When she reveals this to a journalist, terrorists attempt to assassinate him.

George Orwell described the ideologue as a man who thinks in slogans and talks in bullets. The Leftist journalist Ramon thinks in slogans, although he leaves the shooting to others. *Barcelona* is punctuated with acts of Leftist terrorism which kill and maim

I know some people think articles I wrote in some way related to your shooting. I don’t agree that a journalist should be criticized for writing articles he believes to be true. But if anything I have done caused you harm in any way [Fred is wearing a patch over the eye he lost in the attack], please accept my sincere regret. If there is anything I can do for you in the future, please do not hesitate.

Fred does not hesitate and uses Ramon’s apology as his chance to get Ramon to help him to begin a liaison with Montserrat.

Fred’s lying and Ramon’s ideological distortions represent the extreme poles of a common difficulty. It is hard to get language to match reality. Everyone in the movie speaks both Spanish and English. Ted even knows Catalan. In practice, however, their shared languages lead to constant misunderstanding. Some mistakes provide the plot’s main source of humor. Others lead to serious problems, both personal and political.

When Ted and Fred go out the night of Fred’s arrival, Fred wears his naval dress uniform. He has interpreted the direct order not to wear the uniform in public “as more of a guideline,” since his civilian clothes are embarrassingly unfashionable. As the pair get out of Ted’s car, a girl calls Fred, “facha.” Ted explains that the term is slang for “fascist.” “Don’t worry,” Ted says. “They

call everybody that. I mean, you comb your hair, or wear a coat and tie, and you're a 'facha.' A military uniform—definitely 'facha.'" Fred initially misunderstands. "So 'facha' is a something good then. . . . Because if they were referring to the political movement Benito Mussolini led, I'd be really offended." Later Fred gets worked up about the incident ("They obviously didn't mean 'facha' in the positive sense.") and in a fit of patriotic indignation, tries to deface anti-American graffiti. While he is doing this, a car pulls up. The trade-show girls inside, who know Ted, see an American in a naval uniform defacing Leftist graffiti. Instead of giving the scene its obvious and correct interpretation, they assume that Fred's uniform is a costume and that they are all headed for the same costume ball. Fred casts aside his patriotic indignation and uses the mistake to begin a liaison with Marta. After they have slept together, she notices that his "costume" has his name in it. "Let me see that," says Fred, who takes the uniform jacket from her and looks at it. "God, how odd."

Confusion and misunderstanding plague politics as well as romance. Ramon has persuaded the trade-show girls that there is an American union called the "AFL-CIA." Marta refuses to believe Fred's denials: "It's amazing the things Americans don't know about their own country." When Ted explains to Montserrat that Ramon is confusing the union, the AF(of)L-CIO with the CIA, Montserrat replies, "Then what Marta said was partly true." In Stillman's script, which differs from the movie as it was released, Ramon in the end is wounded in a terrorist attempt on the life of the American consul. Although the Leftist terrorists are promptly captured, his paranoia remains unshaken. From his hospital bed, he asks Fred, "What makes you so certain that the attack of yesterday was not planned by the covert agencies of the United States—

or known to them beforehand and allowed to happen?" (The only person in *Barcelona* connected with the CIA is the wise, paternal Jack Tyrell of IHSMOCO back in Chicago.)

Misunderstandings affect Ted also. He agrees to go to a jazz concert with the trade-show girl, Aurora, under the impression that Lionel Hampton will be playing. The concert turns out to feature Canadian Vinyl Hampton. It is significant that when he meets his future bride, Greta, she shares his distaste for Ramon and insists on using a Spanish word to describe him, rather than fumble in English. Ted understands immediately. Greta, not Montserrat, is right for Ted. She helps him care for Fred and shares his religious inclinations, drawing (often inappropriate) angels into her sketches. She is immune to the reflex anti-Americanism of the movie's other Europeans. Ted explains, "Greta's actually looking forward to the eighty channels of television and abundance of consumer products in the U.S. I mean, it doesn't bother her at all."

Ted has been trying to escape the loneliness of life abroad by getting in touch with his ethical, cultural, and religious roots. One night Fred and Marta discover Ted in his apartment, where he is reading the Bible while dancing alone to a radio playing Glen Miller's "Pennsylvania 6-5000." It is a memorable image of the plight of the American in search of traditions. Separated from his country for business reasons, he dances by himself to the music his parents enjoyed while reading the Bible to make sense of his life. "What is this?" Fred asks. "Some strange Glen Miller-based religious ceremony?" "No," Ted replies. "Presbyterian."

Fred is also remorseless when Ted complains because Fred has invented a story that Ted wears leather underwear.

"Do you think any even mildly cool trade-fair girl would give you the time of day if she knew the pathetic, Bible-dancing goody-goody you really are? You're far weirder than someone

merely 'into S&M.' I mean, they have some kind of tradition, we have some idea what S&M is all about—there're books and movies about it. There is nothing to explain what you are."

Fred here is giving his negative spin to American exceptionalism, a concept that goes back to Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1783): "What then is the American, this new man? He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." It is the vision that led Goethe to utter his famous beatitude. While it is not true of the American founding, or of American religion, literature, or art, it is true that individual Americans have lost touch with the ancient and European traditions of citizen, farmer, and believer.

Ted sees himself as a traditionalist. A charismatic teacher persuaded him that business was not like Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," and partly by accident he settled into the sales division of Jack's company. "In sales," he explains, "I discovered not just a job but a culture. Franklin, Emerson, Carnegie and Bettger were our philosophers, and thanks to the genius of Carnegie's theory of human relations, the so-called Dale Carnegie system, many customers also became friends." The culture of sales allows Ted to make sense of his life but blinds him to the rich traditions and physical beauty of Europe. The most beautiful streets in Barcelona remind him of Michigan Avenue in Chicago.

Ted tells a Catalan businessman, "In true sales you're providing a real and constructive service—helping people make their lives more agreeable, or their companies more efficient, and in so doing creating wonderful economies of scale from which everyone and the whole economy benefit." Ted points to the beauty of Barcelona and continues,

"I mean, look around—all this, everything we see, was built with sales."

For Ted, one of the most beautiful cities in Europe "was built with sales." This is the innocent provincialism that persuaded Oswald Spengler that there is no true culture in America, only business and material production. Yet the culture of sales gives Ted the moral standards that others find in religion and philosophy. To explain why it is best to tell the truth Ted quotes from his hero Bettger (who is himself quoting someone else, since this is a tradition): "The wisest and best salesman is always the one who bluntly tells the truth about his article.... Being bluntly honest is always safe and best." Fred's lies, deployed to "sell" himself to attractive women, are wrong and they are not safe. Because of them he is shot and maimed.

Ultimately Ted's intelligence and honesty pay off for him, as Fred's brazen insouciance to the truth leads to his maiming. When the head of marketing Dickie Taylor arrives in Barcelona to announce that Jack is dying and wants Ted and Dickie to succeed him, Dickie explains to the stunned Ted that Jack never planned for Ted to stay in sales. "You're not cut out for sales—it's not your life's work." Ted objects, "But.... sales is more than just a job one's cut out or not cut out for. It's a culture, a whole way of thinking about experience—bringing to bear all the insights of Carnegie and Bettger...." Dickie stops Ted. "Listen, we all like Carnegie and Bettger, but what they teach can be applied to management, marketing and everything else. Sales is the heart of any commercial corporation.... But have you read Drucker?" Then Dickie gives Ted a copy of Peter Drucker's *The Effective Executive*. It is a book for leaders, and Ted's critical intelligence and honesty show that he is a natural leader.

Barcelona's last scene is set on an American lake where Fred, Ted, and Dickie are

enjoying a vacation with their European wives. The girls are eating hamburgers having learned, as Ted had predicted, that European scorn for hamburgers was due to the poor quality of European hamburgers which would wilt before the taste of the real thing. Misunderstandings continue, however. Dickie is with Aurora, but one thing puzzles him. “She keeps asking me about my ‘underwear’—and then smirking—as if I’m supposed to know what she’s talking about.... What are ‘weekends of fun’?” Stillman’s stage direction reads: *Fred, surprised, looks at Ted. Ted doesn’t seem very surprised.* “Oh, that,” Ted says. “Montserrat was the same way. Apparently it’s some Barcelona girl thing.” Fred has suffered partial loss of memory from the shooting and nods. “It does sound familiar.”

Earlier in the movie Ted explodes when he finds out that Fred has told Montserrat the same story about him. “Just once,” he tells Fred angrily, “I’d like to go out with a girl not convinced that I’m encased in black leather underwear.” Fred looks up from his newspaper, puzzled. “That bothers you?” Ted replies, “The exact same story, over and over again!” “Well,” Fred protests, “it’s not exactly the same. I always vary it a little.” Fred’s defense is simple. Without Fred’s stories, “Do you think any even mildly cool trade-show girl would give you the time of day?”

Stillman’s direction indicates that this time Ted, not Fred, is the source of the story. Ted has told it to interest Aurora in Dickie, who is a good businessman but boring. Ted then explains the advantages of life with a European. “You see, one of the great things about getting involved with someone from another country—you can’t take it personally. What’s really terrific is that when we act in ways which might objectively be considered incredibly obnoxious or annoying—(and Fred and Dickie nod), they don’t get upset at all, they don’t

take it personally, they just assume it’s some national characteristic.” Fred assents, “Cosa de gringos.” As the movie ends, the three men “stand on the lodge terrace with thoughtful expressions, pensively sipping their beers, nodding in agreement, looking out toward the Lake. Inside someone puts on music.”

The ending is perhaps an homage to the end of Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate*, which Fred in *Barcelona* remembers to his cousin as follows: “Katherine Ross has just married this really cool guy—tall, blond, very popular, the ‘make-out king’ of his fraternity at Berkeley—when this obnoxious Dustin Hoffman character shows up and starts pounding on the glass at the back of the church, acting like a total asshole. Does Katherine Ross tell Dustin Hoffman, ‘Get lost, creep. I’m a married woman.’ No—she runs off with him, on a bus. That’s the reality.” Fred’s faulty memory omits the movie’s last shot. As Hoffman and Ross sit down in the back of the bus, excited by her escape from a conventional marriage, they find they have nothing to say to one another. They stare forward as Simon and Garfunkel sing “The Sounds of Silence.” Their marriage will be as mired in silent incomprehension as their parents’ marriages, the fate they are running away from.

It is a famous scene, and if “That’s the reality,” a much better argument against marriage than what Fred remembers. In *Barcelona*’s last shot, the European women are inside enjoying their hamburgers and fantasizing about their American mates’ sexual peculiarities. The American men are outside, sipping beer and appreciating “what’s really terrific” about mutual incomprehension, nodding silently as music starts to play.

Ted’s intelligence and his commitment to the traditions he understands, sales and religion, have given him success in business, where blunt honesty and a straightforward

reading of the text lead to success. In romance, however, Fred was on to part of the truth. Americans and Europeans, indeed, men and women, can never fully understand one another. Of course, Ramon's political paranoia must be rejected and the cool trade-show girls must learn to bite, if not the proverbial bullet, at least the American hamburger. They must, however, be

allowed their illusions. Illusion, not blunt truth telling, is essential for romance and mutual misunderstanding can sometimes be a blessing. Ted has learned how to get for himself and his friends a happy ending that combines the best part of America, work, and the best part of Europe, life. For Ted and his friends, Goethe's words are true. "Amerika, du hast es besser!"

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