



Exhibition «Scenes of the World to Come:
European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893-1960»
19/02/1996 - 05/05/1996

Americanisation and Modernity

In the beginning, there was Americanism. In a beautiful essay on Saint Petersburg, Joseph Brodsky remembers the enthusiasm with which the literary critic Belinski said, in the 1830s, that “Saint Petersburg was more original than all the American cities put together, because it was a new city in an old country”. And he also evokes Dostoievsky, who, a quarter of a century later, replied sarcastically: “Here you have the architecture of a vast modern hotel: its efficiency, its Americanism, hundreds of rooms; of course, we too have the railway, and have also suddenly become an attractive and enterprising people”.

Americanism as a benchmark for modernity. The Europe which, as Paul Morand said, sent the children it wished to punish to New York, is gradually becoming aware that its children have grown up and consider themselves to be the centre of the universe. The history of Europe in thrall to the monster she helped engender is, to a great extent, the history of the twentieth century. Over there, on the other side, modernity is felt as a natural thing. Here, the only thing we can add is tradition: the new city in the old town, as Belinski put it.

First we construct the myth, Americanism, and afterwards the transposition, Americanisation, comes into effect, as Jean-Louis Cohen, the exhibition curator, quite rightly points out.

Americanisation is the theme. While America takes on the air of a promised land in a war-torn Europe, the process of transferral begins. A process which follows the path of the symbolic—the architecture of power—, but which spreads to the sphere of the lived city (urban planning as far as the geographical and historical structure will allow it to go) and finally reaches the territory of customs and mentalities (through the design of everyday life, of the culture of mass reproduction and universal communication).

We began with skyscrapers and have ended with McDonald's. America transferred its own modernity and has ended up acting as the go-between for universal modernity. The theme of this exhibition focuses on part of the story of this interrelationship, in which the mother is reconstructed in the exact image of the child who went away. There is no contact without mixing. At the end of the journey it will become increasingly difficult to disentangle the strictly American aspects of Americanisation from those elements which are now able to embark on the return journey.

America, America is no longer the sigh for the promised land it once was. All myths run aground in the face of harsh reality. America has been the mirror of a certain European modernity; perhaps the most mimetic. But, is there anything she hasn't pervaded?