

AMERICAN VISIONS/ MANIFEST DESTINY

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpOun_Tf5yg&list=PLDF4A4CCB9DB13FEF&index=12&feature=plpp_video

Episode 3 part 2/5

A partir de 1'34

Robert Hughes

Like Cole, (Thomas **Cole** English-born American Hudson River School **Painter**, 1801-1848) Audubon saw how American Progress **threatened** the continent. Some of his elegies had species that were already facing extinction and he was **right to worry**. The **Star of Empire** as some Americans call it was rising and the **movement** was **west**.

Song : America the Beautiful (almost as famous as the Star-spangled Banner, celebrating the beauty of America instead of its heroes)

*O beautiful for **pilgrim** feet
Whose stern impassion'd stress
A thoroughfare for **freedom** beat
Across the **wilderness***

On March 2nd 1846, the following words were declaimed to the US Senate : *“the untransacted **destiny** of the American people is to **subdue** the continent, to **rush** over these vast fields to the Pacific Ocean, to **teach** old nations a **new civilization**. **Divine** task! **Immortal mission!** Let us tread **fast** and **joyfully** the open trail **before us**”*(Galpin)

The phrase that some days after all this happened rang in the ears of American whites was **Manifest Destiny**. It meant what it said : that it was **obvious**, manifest, beyond all argument, that the Empire had **to expand** beyond the **Mississippi** and not stop rolling **until it met the Pacific**. Whatever you found **on the way** was yours by **absolute right**, and if the Indians fought back, they weren't just **resisting invaders**, they were up **against history** itself, and to see yourself as a **force of history** is to be absolved from both **pity** and from **guilt**. Manifest Destiny was America's great myth of redemptive violence, and art played a considerable role in promoting it.

John Gast's picture *American Progress* shows a **goddess** with the **Star of Empire** stuck to her **forehead** proceeding like a **blond** blimp **above** the ranks of the **advancing settlers** while **the Indians fall back**. She unreels **telegraph wire** as she goes.

In higher art the message was less blatant, but not very much : Albert Bierstadt paints the conestoga **wagons** rolling forward into the **westerling sun** which floods them in **golden light**, implying as one orator put it, that **“Progress is God”**. (Galpin)

Cheap colored prints were produced by the lithographers Currier and Ives, enticing near mass audiences with promises of fortune in the West where the settler would arrive in an American Eden, filling his log cabin with abundant game and family values. The hero of

Manifest destiny was Daniel Boone, the frontier scout, Indian killer and real estate dealer, who found a way from Virginia across the mountains into Kentucky, and thus westward. Here, the artist George Caleb Bingham fuses him with the biblical image of Moses, leading his people towards a land of milk and honey.

“The Daniel Boone legend sets the terms of the mythology that would for Americans describe and explain the process of westward expansion for the next century. The process always involves some kind of exile from civilization, a kind of regression to the world of the savage, but from that regression comes a kind of purification, and a new contact with nature, a regeneration of the spirit, a regeneration of earthly fortunes as well, and ultimately, the man who has gone to the wilderness becomes the agent for a further advance of civilization **against** the wilderness”.

In 1861, the United States government decided to make the imagery of Manifest Destiny official by commissioning a huge 600 square foot mural for one of the main staircases in the Capitol in Washington. The artist chosen was Emanuel Leutze who had already become famous for painting Washington crossing the Delaware, and if there was any other artist in America who could be relied upon to produce a large patriotic efficient engine as it was, that man was Leutze. The metaphor is Exodus, with that Daniel Boone-like frontier scout once again as Moses displaying the Promised Land of California to the Chosen People toiling up the crest of the Rockies. A man rises in his stirrups to catch sight of the distant land, broken wagon wheels and animal skulls suggest the death toll of earlier migrations, but there is no one left to oppose them now, the plains below are empty of Indians.

But the victims of Manifest Destiny never ceased to haunt the art of American whites. In the Black Hills of South Dakota, picks are working on the largest if perhaps not the best sculpture in the world. Begun in 1949, the blasting of the mountain into an effigy of the Lakota Indian chief Crazy Horse. The whole thing will be 560 feet high. Crazy Horse's nose alone is 70 feet high. It's the invention of a Polish immigrant, Korczak Ziolkowski, who meant it as a reply to the faces of the Presidential dead white males on Mount Rushmore 20 miles away. Korczak died in 1982 but his family continued blasting up the form of Crazy Horse.....

Crazy Horse points an answer to the derisive question of the white men : “where are your lands now?” He answers : “My lands are where my dead lie buried”.

This line was Korczak's starting point.

“Ain't that beautiful? Ain't that beautiful?”

The European artists have been praising, deriding, trying to be objective about American Indians ever since they got here. The most energetic of them was the artist explorer George Catlin in the 1830s. Catlin was largely free from the prejudices that disfigured white American views of Indians. He didn't idealize them as noble savages, he didn't demonize them as brutes. He tried to see them as real people in a real if exotic social setting.

“Catlin also tries to deal with this problem of the ephemeral quality of the wilderness, the fact that we destroy it as soon as we appropriate it... and the paintings are a means of preserving at least the images of that world...”