

# Holding Up A Mirror



*How Civilizations  
Decline*

ANNE GLYN-JONES

**IMPRINT ACADEMIC**

P.O. Box 1, Thorverton EX5 5YX, UK

Tel: +44 1392 841600 Fax: 841478 [sandra@imprint.co.uk](mailto:sandra@imprint.co.uk)

[www.imprint.co.uk/books](http://www.imprint.co.uk/books)

## Chapter 1

# *Illusion and Reality: Does It Matter Which Is Which?*

---

Is there any reality other than the one we can hear and see and smell and touch? If so, is it in the end the only reality that matters, when all the material world of our experience, including ourselves, has been absorbed into Nature's unending process of recycling?

No one knows. But human beings hold, and have always held, strong opinions on the subject, and have sought to fashion their societies according to these beliefs.

In communities dominated by belief in some other, non-material world, the purpose of life on earth is to obey the Unseen Powers, either in the hope of personal salvation in an afterlife or at least to be worthy of protection or favour in this; at its most extreme, a life of anxious supplication and propitiation. Whether the dominant emotion in the devotee is fear or adoration, the morality is strict; and since deviation may result in disaster for the whole community, it will be firmly enforced by law. Sorokin identified Greek society prior to the fifth century BC, and European civilization from about the fifth to the twelfth centuries AD, as being predominantly of this type. Khomeini's Iran is an obvious contemporary example. [1]

Such a society, which Sorokin calls 'ideational', distrusts the experience of the senses as illusory, believing that reality is immaterial, transcendental, eternal and unchanging. It is to be experienced by looking inwards into the soul, not outwards at the world around us. Truth is attained through revelation, its interpreters are the priests and prophets. Proposed changes to

the existing way of doing things are tested by reference to sacred books and traditions. Men and women do not feel restricted by supposed biological limits, for there is a strong belief in the power of mind over matter. Fire-walking or yogic demonstrations such as remaining alive without food or air are products of this point of view. Miracles are taken for granted — they are a logical outcome of prevailing attitudes; and when in sickness or distress, believers will place much more faith in miracles than in medicine. Where the other world counts for so much, frugality in daily life, even asceticism, is admired and emulated.

A society less worried by a sense of impotence in the face of occult forces, more confident about its ability to control its environment, can dare to relax in its enjoyment of the material world. Attitudes towards human aspirations become more gentle. The Unseen Powers are envisaged as positively benign and understanding of human beings, whose happiness is now a legitimate objective, though only achievable within the moral framework established by the transcendent world. The material world begins to be valued for its own sake, for its beauty and bounteousness, and its potential begins to be explored. But while the material world is now accepted as real and important, it is not seen as having any authority in the realm of values, either moral or aesthetic. Sorokin calls such societies 'idealist'. Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries BC he views as conforming predominantly to this approach to truth, which in Europe was ending by the fourteenth century.

In a society in which materialism is the only reality recognized, the purpose of life is fulfilment in the here and now, the pursuit of happiness, which is increasingly interpreted in material terms. (This does not exclude, at least in theory, an altruistic preference for someone else's fulfilment rather than one's own, as in the self-sacrifice of the committed Marxist on behalf of some other generation.) Europe and America since the eighteenth century clearly exemplify this trend,<sup>i</sup> as did Greece of the third and subsequent centuries BC. Roman writers themselves identified the second century BC as the period

---

[i] Sorokin pushed the dating back to the sixteenth century, but there is room for continuing dispute about the depth and direction of the impact of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

when the values of their own society began to shift towards what we would now call consumerism.

The pursuit of happiness is worthless unless each individual can pursue his own definition of what for him constitutes happiness; thus individualism is a marked characteristic of hedonistic societies. In the early phases of the evolution from a society based on otherworldly tenets, a vestigial absolute moral order may remain, but absolutes give way to relatives. Law is brought into conformity with the demand for maximum choice in the pursuit of personal fulfilment, subject only to constraints where conduct might lead to unhappiness for others; thus in our own society the law has been amended to decriminalize abortion and homosexual practices between consenting adults, and to abolish such impediments to personal self-expression as the censorship of literature or the theatre.

In this system of thought, 'true reality and true value is sensory . . . beyond the reality and value perceived by our sense organs there is no other reality and no value.' [2] When Sorokin called such societies 'sensate', he chose a word implying not only the pursuit of sensual satisfaction, but also the instruments by which truth was to be apprehended. Knowledge must be tested by practical experiments. The importance of the senses for the collection of evidence is enhanced by every available and inventible way of extending sensory perception, such as microscopes and telescopes. The interpreters of this version of truth, the validity of which permeates almost all assumptions, are the scientists.

Of course no society of any size or complexity is a pure manifestation of any of these world views. Exponents of all three, and variants of them, exist in all societies, though unevenly distributed among different social groups and different historical epochs. In some ages philosophic confusion is such that no world-view is dominant, and such transitional periods, when there are no accepted criteria of conduct or belief, may be very uncomfortable for those — in government or in the family, for instance — in positions of responsibility for others. At the other extreme are societies that are clearly dominated by a *Weltanschauung* that is widely shared; but even so it will contain maverick individuals, and whether they are tolerated as eccentrics, imprisoned as dissidents or expunged as here-

tics, their attitudes are the germ from which will spring the orthodoxy of a different generation.

These three different views of the world and our place in it can be traced in the evolution of law and custom; in the relationship between religion and science; in attitudes to technology, and to the exploitation of the material world; in the dominant philosophies, political, moral and metaphysical; and in the way in which different societies behave. Above all, they are made manifest in the arts.<sup>ii</sup>

Sorokin's analysis paid particular attention to painting. The purpose of the analysis is *not* to establish some sort of hierarchy of aesthetic excellence (an ambition which in any case would be hard put to escape the accusation of being purely subjective), but to illustrate through its art what mattered most to the society under scrutiny.

Sorokin's conclusion, based on the massive collection of data provided by his teams of collaborators, was that ideational art is largely abstract or symbolic. He maintains that the seemingly crude art of primitive peoples is not the result of lack of skill; some simply chose to be non-naturalistic. Female figurines all bust and belly are not failed attempts to depict twentieth-century sex goddesses, they are saying something symbolic about fertility. Evidence abounds among the cave paintings of early times to show that primitive peoples did not lack talent for representational art. The style derives not from the degree of creative ability, but from the viewpoint being expressed.

Others have pointed out how reluctant deeply religious societies are to represent the Unseen Powers except symbolically. Islam was not alone in forbidding representations of the Deity; and Joseph Vogt, in *The Decline of Rome*, remarks on the Old Testament prohibition of images which the early Christians inherited from the synagogue. The gravestones in the

---

[ii] To use any one field of human endeavour in isolation from others as the basis for a contention about the values dominant at a particular time and place is a form of circular reasoning, since the evidence available is precisely what has been used to establish the criteria on which judgement is based. Only when the criteria are applied across several fields does the argument have cogency. Bearing that caveat in mind, the arts are the clearest window through which to view the culture of an age and assess its standing on the religious/materialist spectrum, or 'ideational/sensate', to use Sorokin's more specialized though rather ponderous vocabulary.

catacombs, he notes, depict fish, bread and wine; the earliest pictorial representation of Christ, a fresco in the baptistry of a house-church, probably dates from the third century. As more naturalistic depictions occur they take symbolic form – such as Christ the Good Shepherd.<sup>iii</sup> [3]

Sorokin's 'idealist' art registers the natural world, but uses it to depict religious topics. Serenity, permanence, beauty and imperturbability are the hallmarks. The icons of Byzantium typify this phase. As Marina Warner has said, 'Icons get under the skin of reality'<sup>iv</sup> and convince us that they are showing the supernatural from the inside, precisely because they are so indifferent to the look, scale and colour of reality.'<sup>[4]</sup> 'Worldly' pagan art had disappeared by the sixth century. In Western art, the Madonna is a beautiful but entirely non – erotic young woman, Christ is a child, but the symbolic strand is still there, and the child is often portrayed as a small-scale adult, wise, suffering or regal. Scenes of the Crucifixion portray a dying king, any element of common humanity is absent. Not until the end of the first millennium does any suggestion of the sensuous enter the art of Christian nations.

Gradually the natural world impinges on the world of art. Landscapes begin to fill the background of religious paintings, at first as elements in a biblical story, then as celebrations of nature in its own right. Francis A. Schaeffer, in *Escape from Reason*, calls attention to a Van Eyck miniature of 1410.

---

[iii] Robin Lane Fox, in *Pagans and Christians* (pp.393-4), makes a similar point. 'However much we search for this "early Christian art" and ponder the meanings of the crude paintings in the Roman catacombs, we cannot bridge the gap between its schematized, symbolic style and the artistic patronage of the upper classes in the pagan cities... Only one group of early Christians, the heretical Carpocratians, are known to have owned portraits of Christ ... In a famous scene, the "Acts of John", (c.300) told how a pagan convert had attempted to paint John's portrait in Ephesus, but the Apostle had denounced him for daring to perpetuate his form in the material world... The exceptions are very modest... By the mid-third century variable figures of Christ could be seen in wall paintings of the house-church in Dura... Early Christian art was based firmly on Scripture and used a densely compressed symbolism which expressed much more than it represented. In the Book of Revelation... God appears in the abstract, like a precious stone, blazing in brilliant red and white...'

[iv] Quite what constitutes 'reality' is, of course, precisely what is at issue between the three differing cultures.

It measures only about five inches by three inches. But it is a painting with tremendous significance ... the theme is Jesus' baptism, but this takes up only a small section of the area. There is a river in the background, a very real castle, houses, hills and so on — this is a real landscape; nature has become important.

He traces further steps in the progression by which, to use his words, 'nature' becomes autonomous and then proceeds first to challenge and finally to eliminate 'grace'. In 1435 Van Eyck paints a picture in which the donor is portrayed the same size as the Madonna instead of smaller. Towards the end of the same century a more startling change occurs, when Filippo Lippi not only depicts the Madonna as a pretty girl rather than an otherworldly symbol, but his model is widely known to be his mistress.[5]

Traditional Christians opposed this laxity. 'You have given the Virgin the dresses of courtesans . . . That is how the divine cult is profaned,' thundered Savonarola in Tuscany.[6] Infra-red photographs taken in 1987 of Stefan Lochner's Altar der Stadtpatrone in Cologne Cathedral 'show beneath the head of the Madonna another, sketched, head which is remarkably different. The sketch is of a pretty, smiling girl with large eyes and long wavy hair. The final version, which was done in 1445, is of a much primmer, more serious-looking Madonna, with her hair brushed severely back. In the sketch St Ursula wears a low neckline and an enormous brooch on her dress. In the picture the dress is closed to the neck and without the brooch.'[7] Clearly Lochner had moved too fast for his patrons.

Meanwhile, early in the fourteenth century, what claims to be the first pure landscape of the Christian era was painted — *A Castle by a Lake*, by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. It can be seen today in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena. Similar claims to be the first secular paintings are made for the wall frescos with which the papal palace in Avignon is decorated. The papal bedchamber has walls and ceilings covered with depictions of hundreds of birds perched on trailing vines; the beautiful *chambre du cerf* painted in 1343, is filled with lively accounts of hunting, fishing and other country pursuits. By the fifteenth century secular illuminated manuscripts are appearing,

inspired by hunting and falconry. Lavishly illustrated copies of Gaston Phébus's *Livre de chasse*, for instance, are extant, allowing full scope to depictions of horse and hound, stags and boars, lords and ladies, their castles and retainers.

Sorokin classifies only the late twelfth, the thirteenth and part of the fourteenth centuries as idealistic, after which religious symbolism is largely superseded by naturalistic, visual art. The Child is a genuine baby, not a symbol of majesty. From the period of the Renaissance it is the humanity rather than the spirituality of Christ that is being stressed. *Et incarnatus est*. As Leo Steinberg explains in his *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 'In many hundreds of pious, religious works, from before 1400 to past the mid sixteenth century, the ostensive unveiling of the Child's sex or the touching, protecting or presentations of it, is the main action. And the emphasis recurs in images of the dead Christ... proving nothing less than what the Creed itself puts at the center: God's descent into manhood.' [8]

The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation marked a temporary ebb in the sensate tide, as the Church, both Protestant and Catholic, fought a rearguard action against the rising tide of humanism. In the Vatican, following the Council of Trent, de Voleterra was commissioned to clothe St Blaise and St Catherine of Alexandria, shown nude in the Sistine Chapel. Puritanism painted out the wall frescos, tore down the statues and smashed the stained-glass windows.

The recoil did not last. Religious art begins to lose its serenity, concerning itself with torment, both in this world and in the world to come. Satan, who, until about the twelfth century, had been a fallen angel, becomes more demonic. Sorokin considers that by the end of the fifteenth century religious art has entirely ceased to be, in his sense of the word, idealist. [9] The dead Christ is a corpse. The tortures of the damned become increasingly prominent, and by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have reached sadistic proportions. But alongside it a sensate art is developing, celebrating humanity and its preoccupations in this world. The Renaissance rediscovery of classicism chose the Roman and Hellenistic world in its full sensate phase; and when biblical subjects were portrayed, interest centred on those with the greatest erotic or voluptuous possibilities (Susanna bathing, for instance).

Ideational art was often an object of veneration in itself, carrying a message beyond itself. Sensate art is art for art's sake, and it is intended to entertain. Baroque develops into rococo, which Fowler's *Modern English Usage* delightfully defines as 'a form taken by baroque when it aimed no longer at astounding the spectator with the marvellous, but rather at amusing him with the ingenious'.[10] After 1767 a new phrase, 'fine arts', gains currency, implying, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the arts which are concerned with 'the beautiful' or which appeal to taste.

The subject matter glorifies the material world. 'Turner relocates divinity, hitherto the prerogative of religious painting., in the secular tradition of landscape,' says the art critic Andrew Graham-Dixon. 'Whether he actually said so or not, in his art the sun *is* God.'[11] No longer enmeshed in the portrayal of eternal verities, the world of Being, sensate art explores the changing surfaces of the world of Becoming. The Impressionists could return over and over again to the same subject, painting it in new colours each time according to how the light fell or the seasons advanced. Michael Brenson, discussing Monet's work, says, 'since light in nature is constantly changing, painting the movement of light was a form of realism'[12] — again, a reminder that it is the exploration of phenomena rather than the search after metaphysical essences that now constitutes 'reality'.

The Impressionists, remarks Christopher Lloyd, Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures, 'record the pleasures and disappointments of everyday life, as opposed to the religious, historical or mythological themes that preoccupied their predecessors'.[13] Nicholas Wadley, assessing the nineteenth-century art critic Edmond Duranty, quotes his insistence that the credibility of 'the new painting' depended 'on truth to the reality of daily life in the modern world'.[14] The high life of the nobility yields pride of place to middle-class solidity before interest switches to the low life of the prostitute and the pimp. Graham-Dixon's insights into Degas provide an apt commentary:

Degas painted laundresses, aching, stretching and drinking their way through days of unrelieved tedium; alcoholics (as in the famous *L'Absinthe*); and, above all, prostitutes ... Prostitutes sprawl or

lie carelessly across sofas in dim, seedy interiors; their clients are sheepish, guilt-ridden gents in suits, or brutish gawpers, like the fatuously beaming chap who leers up at the nude taking a bath in *L'Admiration*. The brothel is more than a topical milieu, for Degas. A place of sad, transitory couplings, it comes to stand for the modern world itself: as soon forgotten as experienced, emptied of moral significance.

And he goes on to say: 'They are modern pictures, in that Degas's nudes take their place in no discernible narrative, express no high ideals, embody no moral philosophy. They simply exist.' [15]

The willingness to explore simple existence, unconstrained by taste or illusion, is exemplified in the same critic's assessment of Lucien Freud's mid-twentieth-century nudes, his 'undoubted masterpieces'.

Breasts are rarely pert, self-sustaining, in these pictures; they droop and sag, veinously overabundant, from bodies marked by the dimples and creases and stretchmarks of time. Pubic hair is disobedient to bikini-line convention. Vaginas are unconcealed — there is no sense, in Freud, of genteel propriety. These bodies are rendered with a mature, open-eyed awareness of physical realities — modern *vanitas* paintings, Freud's nudes are ripe with mortality . . . analogies for his glum, lonely sense of himself and others. . . [16]

Loneliness, that ultimate perquisite of untrammelled individualism, is a quality that distinguishes the work of another highly praised twentieth-century painter — Francis Bacon.

In almost all Bacon's paintings man is displayed in absolute solitude, and deliberately severed from his fellows by a suffering which no pity can allay.., the solitude in Bacon's paintings is not simply the loneliness of consciousness: it is a solitude of flesh and is revealed precisely by the torturing of the flesh, which has nothing to give, nothing at all, save the solitary 'I', fought out, in a glare of electric light, and

usually in some highly focused raised area such as a podium or cage. It is this 'I' which is projected by Bacon's screaming mouths... Bacon gives us no simple or dogmatic answers to the question of our nature: he tells us only that we are *here* and *now*; this is the source of our solitude, and the occasion of our responsibility for a life that we alone can live...[17]

'Ebullient despair' is Bacon's own description of his work.[18] Bernard Levin has commented that Bacon's version of the Crucifixion is a story of shame, degradation, failure and death, lacking all those intimations of triumph, incorruptibility and eternal life with which earlier artists had managed to invest their paintings of the Passion.'[19] His subject matter has included *Paralytic Child on All Fours*, two pictures of a friend dying on the lavatory of a haemorrhage, and assorted pictures of homosexual activities, including 'his most important work in the permanent collection . . . his central panel of buggers'.[20]

Obsessive representational authenticity is not, however, the only influence at work. The human psyche is easily bored. Writing in the second century BC, the Greek historian Polybius remarked, 'I would appeal to the testimony of Nature herself, who in the case of any of the senses never elects to go on persistently with the same allurements, but is ever fond of change...', and he goes on to illustrate how ear, palate, eye and even intellect require variety.'[21] The more 'sensate' the content of the art, the more rapidly novelty is sought, and 'innovative' becomes the highest accolade.<sup>v</sup> Sorokin emphasizes that, as the palate becomes jaded, the appetite must be stimulated by stronger fare.

The basic sensory values, through constant repetition, come to lose the fascination of novelty — to become hackneyed and boring. Without novelty, the entertainment value begins to evaporate... The art is forced, under these circumstances, to pass rapidly from one object, event, style and pattern to another, at an ever increasing tempo... [hence] ... the

---

[v] A trait well explored by Christopher Booker in his 1969 publication, *The Neophiliacs* (London: Collins).

---

morbid concentration of sensate art on pathological types of persons and events.[22]

For the best part of a century we have seen a challenge to the boredom of representational, naturalistic art from a changing spectrum of modern artists — the Cubists, Dadaists, futurists, surrealists. Although Sorokin recognized that they constituted a revolt against the sensate art of surface appearances, he saw them as an artistic cul-de-sac rather than as harbingers of a new ideational art, since they remain, in his opinion, rooted in the exploration of the material world; not least when the use of three dimensions (sculpture) introduces an additional sense — that of touch.<sup>vi</sup> [23]

So far as popular art and entertainment are concerned, the result of this tendency to boredom is a search for an increasingly provocative appeal to increasingly anaesthetized emotions, with ever-cruder depictions of violence, and a progressively more explicit treatment of sex, until sex and violence coalesce in the amalgam of pornography.

Traditionalists may find such an art distasteful. But it may well coexist with — indeed, as this book seeks to show, it is implicit in Sorokin's analysis of the values inherent in sensate societies that it is *likely* to coexist with — increasingly successful manipulation of the material world, and thus rising living standards. Christopher Booker, using architecture as his medium of interpretation, illustrates the point.

Architecture is ultimately about human identity — it is one of the most important external things which help to tell us who we are. There is no clearer book in which to read changes in the prevailing view of who we are and what is most important to us than in the kinds of building which our civilization has raised over the past 800 years.

In the soaring verticals of the great Gothic cathedrals we see the reflection of a society ultimately centred on its sense of the transcendent. In the harmoniously proportioned horizontals of the Renaissance or the 18<sup>th</sup>-century terraces of Bath, we see a

---

[vi] By the same token, nor does a political revolution changing the beneficiaries of the economic system but not the materialist assumptions on which it operates constitute a change on the ideational-sensate spectrum.

society becoming more materialistic and 'man-centred', but for which the highest values were still aesthetic and intellectual.

In the hideous sprawl of the 19th-century factories, railways and slums, we see a society for which the highest value was becoming man's material power to transform nature. In the suburban semis of the first half of the 20th century, we see the true architecture of democracy, everyone an individual in his own individual (though almost identical) box.

Finally, in the neogargantuan architecture of the past 30 years, the great office blocks and housing estates, shopping centres and multi-storey car parks, we see the full visible reflection of a society whose highest values are material comfort for the greatest number, and the re-submergence of the individual in a new kind of collectivism, based on subservience to the all-providing machine. '[24]

The emotions of awe and sublimity inspired by a Gothic cathedral may be absent from the multi-storey car park, but the latter represents a society in which a far higher proportion of people are warm, well fed, well sheltered, well clothed, and, if not 'well' read, at least literate. Who is to say that the one civilization is somehow less 'great' than the other?

Yet a sense of unease persists in our Western society, and seems to be deeper than the simple recognition that new contenders like Japan are achieving levels of wealth comparable to, or even in excess of, those we have enjoyed. We know that past civilizations with notable achievements to their credit have not reached some plateau and remained there. They have 'fallen'. Subsequent generations look back on ruined cities where diminished populations live in squalor and wretchedness, where the struggle for bare existence leaves no place for either the creation or the enjoyment of any but the most minimum level of artistic endeavour, and where, if conquest or infiltration by outsiders has accompanied the decline, as it all too often has, even the language and place names of the people may have been wiped out. The uneasy are uncomfortably aware that what Sorokin calls the sensate phase, others have called decadent, effete or 'aged'.

---

Are we trapped in some ineluctable process which it is beyond our power to influence? When, in 146 BC, the victorious Roman general Scipio stood watching flames consume the Carthage he had been sent to destroy, there were tears in his eyes, and his *aide-de-camp* heard him murmuring lines from Homer's *Iliad*, foretelling the destruction of Troy. When questioned, he said that his tears were for Rome, for his own nation, which must share the fate of all things human. 'All cities, nations, and authorities must, like men, meet their doom.' [25]

His fears were a little premature. The Roman Republic had another century to run, the Empire had yet to come into being. But in the long run, of course, the intuition was to prove correct.

Hindu and Buddhist philosophies take a cyclical view of events, in which similar sequences recur across the aeons of eternity. Christians, Marxists and humanists share the assumption that history is linear; not only are events moving in one direction, the journey is from worse to better, notwithstanding digressions, deviations and temporary breakdowns on the way. Medieval Christians admittedly were not sanguine about the direction of change; for them history was moving towards the final apocalypse, but this pessimistic assessment came to be superseded by the optimism of the Enlightenment. The linear viewpoint, however, can still accommodate a belief that so far as particular cultures or civilizations are concerned, Scipio's pessimism is well founded. But founded on what?

In his *Civilisation*, Kenneth Clark says, 'if one asks why the civilization of Greece and Rome collapsed, the real answer is that it was exhausted'. [26] Material resources can be exhausted, but to suggest that the well-springs of creativity have run dry raises more questions than it answers. Biological organisms can become exhausted; indeed the analogy of an organism, progressing from birth to death, is often used as if it explains the rise and fall of civilizations. The Romans themselves did so. The elder Seneca, writing his history in the early Empire, placed Rome's childhood in the time of the ancient kings and her youth during the conquest of Italy; maturity he identified as the period of overseas expansion beginning in

146 BC; and his own era he believed to be senescent, with the emperors the prop of an exhausted old age.[27]

But the concepts of youth, maturity and senility are not helpful when applied to structures that are not in themselves biological — however firmly grounded in the physical world their manifestations may be. The human beings of whom a culture is composed are renewed in each generation, and to say of a culture brimming with creative ideas that it is ‘young’ while a century later, in a period of artistic or innovative inertia, it is ‘old’ is to use labels, not to provide explanations. As Sorokin remarks, what does ‘Gothic’ mean in relation to childhood or adolescence?<sup>vii</sup>[28] The most comprehensive *tour*

---

[vii] An example of the difficulties involved in the youth — maturity analogy may be found in the epilogue to Jean Gimpel’s *The Medieval Machine*. Seeking to compare the growth and decline of medieval France with that of twentieth — century America, Gimpel says, ‘I placed the beginning of France’s mature age in 1254 when St Louis returned from the Crusades and stamped the age with his own decisive maturity, and its end in 1277 when mysticism gained ascendancy over reason.’ He goes on, ‘I chose 1850 as the year the United States entered her era of growth, and I tentatively considered 1953 to be the year she entered her era of maturity because that was the year in which the celebrated Lever House Building was constructed on New York’s Park Avenue. A glass structure only 30 stories high and built primarily for aesthetic reasons rather than with a view to commercial profit, it symbolized a turning point in American psychology... Eventually I came to believe that 1947 might better be considered the point when the United States became “mature”, for that was the year of the Truman Doctrine when the United States took upon herself the responsibility for all the “free world”.’

No unifying criteria underpin these judgements. They range from the personality of the head of state through varying priorities in philosophy and enterprise to power politics. Gimpel’s analysis of an ageing civilization fares no better. Visiting America in 1956, he notices that people no longer hustle, they walk slowly and take long lunch breaks. They are no longer fascinated by gadgets, the evidence of a society’s inventiveness — yet this very fascination for gadgets is advanced in the same chapter as one of the hallmarks of an outworn technology, as typified by the late Hellenistic period. To be fair, Gimpel does list twenty-one factors which he considers indicative of the ‘age’ of a society, almost all of them aspects of the economy, for the crucial measure of success or failure in his eyes is the extent of applied technology. But he takes a highly determinist attitude, remarking of the USA, for instance, ‘When would the United States move out of her era of maturity into her ageing era? I forecast that this could happen as early as the 1970s, since the absolute preeminence of a nation often lasts only some twenty-five years.’

*d'horizon* along these lines is probably Spengler's *Decline of the West*, but fascinating though its mass of detail is, it remains a catalogue, it explains nothing, and is without predictive value.

For Toynbee civilization is not an organism of which human beings are the prisoners, but is a product of human choices. For Sorokin it is the changing convictions about what constitutes ultimate reality that fashion the choices made, and explain the rise and fall of civilizations. It is the culture of the people that determines whether their society will survive or perish. Thus, he dismissed all accounts of human societies which seek to explain change in terms of neurological or physiological psychology, or in environmental, racial, climatic, biological and economic theories: in Cowell's words, 'all mechanisms external to the character, personality and creative power of individuals' [29]

A wholly sensate, materialist society, in Sorokin's opinion, ultimately loses all moral restraint to the point at which crime and lawlessness make the pursuit of happiness a hollow goal. Competition for goods becomes increasingly vicious as greed, untrammelled by other values, outstrips the speed at which resources can be induced to match demand. The resulting loss of social cohesion leaves the community defenceless; revulsion against moral anarchy and the sordidness of sensate arts invites belief in a new and more challenging philosophy of life, thus further disrupting traditional loyalties. In the end, the sensate society commits suicide.

All this the theatre faithfully reflects. Beginning as a form of worship; continuing with human protagonists wrestling with the commands, complexities and incomprehensibility of moral order; switching its focus from the heroic to the common man, its language from poetry to prose, its milieu from cloud-capped towers to kitchens, it seeks for attention through increasingly opulent spectacle and display, before conspiring with the prevailing ethos of late sensate society in an orgy of explicit violence and sex.

**REFERENCES**

For book and periodical details, see Bibliography

1. Sorokin (1937–41) Vol.1, p.60.
2. Sorokin (1947), p.320.
3. Vogt, p.289.
4. *The Independent*, 31 March 1987.
5. Schaeffer, pp.14–16.
6. Deonna, p.226, quoted by Sorokin (1937–41), Vol.1, p.330.
7. *The Independent*, 14 April 1987.
8. Steinberg, pp.1, 8.
9. Sorokin (1941) p.43.
10. Fowler, H.W. p.616. (1927 The definition does not figure in later editions.)
11. *The Independent*, 10 April 1987.
12. Michael Brenson, 'Monet's Complexity and Grandeur Through his Series Paintings', *Sotheby's Preview*, April/ May 1990, p.104.
13. Christopher Lloyd, 'New Approaches to Impressionism', *Sotheby's Preview*, September/October 1989, p.7.
14. Nicholas Wadley, 'Renoir and Impressionism', *Sotheby's Preview*, April/May 1990, p.6.
15. *The Independent*, 22 March 1988.
16. *The Independent*, 8 February 1988.
17. Jessica Gwynne, on the Francis Bacon retrospective at the Tate Gallery, *Salisbury Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, January 1986.
18. *The Independent*, 24 September 1988.
19. *The Times*, 28 June 1985.
20. Ibid.; *The Independent*, 24 September 1988.
21. Polybius, XXXVIII.5.
22. Sorokin (1941), p. 63.
23. Sorokin (1937–41), Vol.1, pp.263–4.
24. Christopher Booker, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 February 1979.
25. Appian, *Punica*, 132.
26. Clark, p.4.
27. Macmullen (1967), p.161.
28. Sorokin (1937–41), Vol.1, p.226.
29. Cowell (1970), p.22.