Speaking of the difference in culture between the United States ("the New World"), and Great Britain ("the Old World"), a recent article makes the following claim:

The aesthetic sense is the primary determiner of culture and, moreover, the New World is dominated by the hypervisual impulse, while the Old World is controlled by the hyperverbal ideal.¹

The article stresses the "otherness" of the culture of the United States from that of Europe. This, of course, cannot be doubted. That Americans and Europeans have cultural differences is obvious to anyone who has been in both Europe and the United States. Bernard Shaw's witty remark (not quoted in the Ohio article) is well known: "The British and the Americans are two peoples separated by the same language."

Shaw's remark is not just clever witticism. It expresses succinctly what many others have perceived, namely, that the British and the Americans use the same English language in very different ways. It is partly a difference in vocabulary. An elevator in New York is a lift in London. An American drug store is a British chemist's shop. It has been said that the statement "I'm mad about my flat" can mean entirely different things depending on who is talking. To the American, it means "I'm angry about my flat tire"; to the British it means "I'm very happy about my living quarters." But more than a difference of vocabulary, there is also a modal difference in handling the language. The question

¹That is the opening sentence of an article entitled "From The Sun Also Rises to High Noon: The Hypervisual Great Awakening in American Literature and Film" by William E.H. Meyer Jr., Journal of American Culture: Studies of a Civilization, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Fall 1996) 25-38. The Journal is the official publication of the American Culture Association, with editorial offices at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. We shall refer to the article as the "Ohio article." Emphasis in the original.
is, Does the difference consist in Americans being “hypervisual” and the British being “hyperverbal”?

*The Evidence For*

There is no doubt that Americans have a visual (or, if one wishes, hypervisual) impulse. Foreign observers noted this long ago. The Ohio article quotes Alexis de Toqueville: “Americans like to discern an object . . . with extreme clearness. They therefore strip off as much as possible all that covers it or conceals it from sight in order to view it more clearly in the broad light of day.”

Here are some of the other examples presented by the Ohio article to illustrate the hypervisual quality of American literature:

Hawthorne: “One solitary ray had dared to rest upon the open page of the great Bible.”

Whitman: “*Watched* the . . . sea-gulls, *saw* them high in the air floating with motionless wings . . . *Saw* the slow-widening circles . . .”

Cooper’s “Hawkeye’s” (named for his sight) climbs a mountain and says, “*I saw* all that God had done or men could do . . .”

Jonathan Edwards: “*Tis light that must convert them . . .”

Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* is a “highly visual symbol.”

The Great Gatsby of Fitzgerald: “with hand in pockets, regards the silver pepper of the stars.”

Hemingway’s night customer in “a clean well-lighted place” does not look for music in a pub, “but light was all it needed and a certain cleanliness and order.”

Even James, said to be the most European of American writers, describes an American named Christopher Newman who says: “I must *see* people, places, act.”

Emerson seems to have been contemptuous of European writers: “When I *see* the daybreak I am not reminded of those Homeric or Chaucerian or Shakespearean or Miltonic pictures, nor of Pope and Addison and Johnson who write *as if they had never seen the face of the country*.”

So much for literature. As for film, the very medium itself is essentially visual, and the American contribution has been crucial to its development. Meyer quotes John O’Connor: “Film without the American contribution is unimaginable.”
The Puritan divine, Jonathan Edwards, spoke of a “Great Awakening” to light. This, says the article, has brought about “a radical revolution in American art far surpassing any ‘renaissance’ of European-inspired ‘flowering’ touted by F. O. Mathiessen and his lackeys.”

“No other country in the world,” says the article, “has both the national anthem and the national symbol in the hypervisual mode.” The national symbol is “the eagle-eyed American Eagle.” The national anthem begins, “Oh say, can you SEE …” A patriotic song proclaims, “Mine eyes have SEEN the glory …” Instead of a Big Ben cognizant of temporality and chime, says the article, “Americans welcome newcomers to New York harbor with Miss Hypervisual Liberty.”

And here begins our suspicion that the thesis is overstated. For the Statue of Liberty is not of American manufacture, but a gift from the Old World, from the French.

The Flaw

What the Ohio article has done in all this is to show, quite persuasively, that American culture has indeed a visual quality. What the article has not shown is that it is precisely on this point that American culture differs from the European, which (the article claims) is “hyperveral.”

For instance, Meyer has brought examples of American literature in which SEEING is prominent, or in which there is emphasis on LIGHT. But a similar (and even more impressive) list could also be made of European writing that stresses these very points.

If Jonathan Edwards’ “‘Tis light that will convert them” is proof of a hypervisual culture, why not Newman’s “Lead kindly light”? Why not Milton’s hymn to light in Paradise Lost? Why not Othello’s anguished whisper, “Put out the light, and then put out the Light!”?

Emerson may dismiss Homer with contempt, but has he ever produced visual images as vivid as Homer’s “rosy-fingered dawn?” or “wine-dark sea”?

If Walt Whitman’s seeing sea-gulls flying is proof of a visual culture, why not Gerard Manley Hopkins’ seeing the windhover? If that is not visual, what is?
Light and Darkness

The fact is that the visual element is not peculiar to American literature but is a common possession of all cultures. Let us take only one motif of the visual element, the motif of light and darkness. It is interesting to see how it is used in five widely differing literary passages in literature, Spanish, Irish, Nicaraguan, English and Italian.

Example One: The Alhambra

At the entrance to the Alhambra in Granada, there is a stanza from one of the Andalucian poets, hinting by suggestion at the beauty of the architecture and the gardens. A blind beggar asks for alms and the poet says to his wife:

Dale limosna, mujer!
Que en la vida hay nada
peon que la pena de ser
ciego en Granada.

(“Give him alms, woman! / For in life there is nothing more painful / Than to be blind in Granada!”)

It is the blind man’s misfortune that he cannot see Granada, thereby suggesting that the Alhambra and its gardens must be beautiful indeed.

Is there anything in American literature more “hypervisual in impulse” than that?

Example Two: Sunlight

Theodore Maynard (best known for a stirring narrative poem The Highwayman) had spent his childhood in India and was ten years old when he first went to England. It was only then, he claims, that he saw the sun:

I never saw the sun till I was ten.

Was there no sun in India? Yes, too much sun. Plants withered under the intense heat. But in England he saw for the first time “the sun kills the living green without withering it.” Years later, living in sunny California, remembering that experience, he brushed aside all the days of
rain and mist in England and only remembered the bright days of sunshine:

No sun in England!
If it shines not there, where does it ever shine?

**Example Three: Autumn Light**

Ruben Dario was Nicaraguan, therefore “American” (North Americans would call him “hispanic”) but he was at home in France and Spain and his poetry is considered part of Spanish literature. His *Canto de Otoño* (Autumn Song) is a reflection on old age and death and the perishability of things. But he does not say with the English poet, “Gather ye flowers while ye may”; instead he talks of the sunlight:

Gozad del sol, la pagana luz de sus fuegos!
Gozad del sol, que mañana estareis ciegos.

(“Enjoy the sun, the pagan light of its fires! Enjoy the sun, for tomorrow you will be blind.”)

**Example Four: Shakespearean Darkness**

In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, before the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth prays to the evil spirits to “unsex” her and give her strength. Then she prays for darkness:

... Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes!

(I.V)

The morning after the murder the sky is so dark that it is hard to believe it is daytime and not night. It is an “unnatural” symbol of the unnatural murder:

... by the clock ’tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp!
Is’t night’s preponderance or the day’s shame
That darkness doth the face of earth entomb?

(II.IV)
Just before Banquo’s murder, there is again a prayer for darkness, this time by Macbeth:

... Come, seeing night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces the great bond  
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow  
Makes wing to the rocky wood;  
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,  
Whilst night’s black agents to their preys do rouse.  
(III.ii)

Just as light symbolizes joy, goodness, life, so darkness evokes evil, sorrow, death.

Example Five; Dante’s Light

Dante’s Commedia begins in a dark wood and ends in the blazing light of the empyrean. The Inferno is a journey through a tunnel in the earth, from which the poets emerge “to see again the stars”:

*e quindi uscimo a riveder le stelle.*

The Purgatorio begins at the foot of the mountain. It is dawn and the morning star (the “love-inducing” planet Venus) “makes the whole eastern sky smile.”

*Lo bel’ pianeta che ad amar conforta  
faceva tutto rider l’oriente.*

The Purgatorio ends on the mountaintop in broad daylight with splendid pageantry. From there the poet prepares “to mount to the stars.”

The Paradiso is a journey through the realms of light. From one crystal sphere to another, each brighter than the previous, the poet ascends until, in the empyrean, he sees the blaze that is the Blessed Trinity. The Trinity had been alluded to in the Inferno in the sign over hell’s gate: the Father as “Supreme Power”, the Son as “Highest Wisdom”, the Holy Spirit as “Primal Love”:

*... fecime la divina potestate,  
la somma sapienza e il primo amore.*
But here in Paradiso’s empyrean, face to face with the Triune God, the poet alludes to the Divine Persons by their nature and origin. The Father is “eternal light that alone subsists by himself.” The Son is generated by the Father by an act of knowing: the Father “understands himself,” and in so doing produces a perfect image of himself, the Logos. The Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son as their mutual love, signified by a smile.

\[ O \text{ luce eterna, che sola in te siddi!} \\
\text{sola t'intendi, e da te inteletta,} \\
\text{ed intendente te, ami ed arridi!} \]