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Emergence or Collapse of Cultural Hierarchy? American Popular Culture Seen from Abroad

My first encounter with American popular culture took place when I was at the tender age of five and growing up in a then notorious working class section of Berlin called Kreuzberg. Among the many colorful characters living in our street was a young woman with not exactly the strictest of morals who tried to make a living in the difficult post War years by entertaining American G.I.s at her apartment. On weekends, this friendly neighbor usually was in trouble - not because of the police, who were fairly tolerant in our quarters, but because of a much more mundane fact of life from which all Germans (and certainly all American visitors to Germany) continue to suffer up to the present day: *das deutsche Ladenschlußgesetz*, that is, the early and very rigid closing hours of shops in Germany. It is not an easy task to entertain on Friday night and then to have all of your weekend shopping done by Saturday at noon. Thus, some time around eleven on Saturday morning our neighbor would lean out of the window and call me and my friend up to her apartment. There, still lying in bed, while an American G.I. was usually shaving in the bathroom, she would give us a shopping list and, upon our return, reward us with some especially precious items which she had received from her visitors: chewing gum with mint flavor and, as the supreme attraction, Superman comics. The rest of the day my friend and I would spend sitting on the sidewalk of the street, eagerly perusing our colorful treasures. To be sure, we could not yet read, neither German nor English. This posed no obstacle, however, to a diligent study of the text. Most of the stories remained somewhat cryptic but this enigmatic quality, confirming later insights by reader response criticism which I encountered during my tenure at the University of Konstanz, was rather stimulating, and not at all discouraging. On the contrary, it allowed us to return to the stories again and again and to speculate about alternative (not yet oppositional!) meanings - altogether an experience of unresolvable ambiguity which served me well in later en-

counters with the work of Henry James. In one short sentence: It was a happy childhood!¹

These early imaginary flights with Superman were the beginning of what could be called a "beautiful friendship" with American popular culture which lasted throughout my childhood and youth. Contrary to what you may expect, however, it was not this influence which brought me to the study of American literature and culture. What attracted me was the encounter with a literary tradition which other Europeans such as D.H. Lawrence and Claude-Edmonde Magny had discovered before and which in its raw and uncompromising vitality stood in welcome contrast to a German middle-class culture that had been badly compromised by national socialism. It is one of the comfortable, self-serving myths of a certain type of populism in Popular Culture Studies that "the people," and especially those low-brow characters from the working class, prefer to stay within their own culture. This may be true in a Frank Capra movie but not necessarily in real life. Quite on the contrary, I still remember the breathtaking realization that a challenging culture existed outside my own and that I was able to understand and to appreciate it.

Thus, what came out of my youthful encounters with American culture is something that, I think, has become very typical of my own and subsequent generations: a rather uncomplicated coexistence of two kinds of culture. This interest in, and appreciation of, two equally fascinating aspects of American culture - a literary tradition with its own unique style and structure and a strongly and strangely appealing popular culture with its rewards of "immediate experience" - has remained with me, so that I do not see any need to separate these

1 In its own anecdotal way, this experience confirms one of the basic insights of recent media studies, namely, the fact that one and the same text can have different meanings and effects, depending on the context of reception. This also means, however, that aesthetic objects cannot be tied to a single ideological or political function. In the following essay, my approach will therefore not be one of ideological analysis but of cultural history. - On the influence of American popular culture in post World War II Germany see the excellent recent study by Kaspar Maase, *BRAVO Amerika! Erkundungen zur Jugendkultur der Bundesrepublik in den fünfziger Jahren*. Hamburg: Junius, 1992. As Maase points out, "Americanization" had entirely unforeseen but welcome political consequences for post War Germany by undermining authoritarian structures and, more specifically, the Prussian ideal of the "military man" much more effectively than official reeducation efforts.

two cultural areas, either in theory or in the more practical world of curricular matters. On the contrary, since high and popular culture together form what may be called the potential space of aesthetic experience in our cultures, it is important to be able to deal competently with both of them. An adequate discussion of modern culture, it seems to me, must be able to address high art as well as popular culture. Thus, the justification of Popular Culture Studies by a programmatic anti-elitism has never appeared very appealing or desirable to me (apart from the fact that it is not really an honest argument because it is usually presented in an academic context). I do not know enough about the situation at American universities and the flexibility or inflexibility of curricula at these institutions to judge whether the course of segregation which Popular Culture Studies seem to pursue in the United States is a necessary institutional strategy in order to survive. But seen from abroad, that is from the needs of German or other European American Studies programs, such a strategy seems counter-productive. Since it is our job to provide information on American culture as a whole, one would not be well advised, for example, to justify the introduction of popular culture material into the American Studies curriculum by anti-elitist rhetoric, as long as writers such as Melville, James, Kate Chopin, or Pynchon are to remain, as I think they should, part of that very same curriculum. If different cultural perspectives are to co-exist in the curriculum in a postmodern spirit of a plurality of cultural voices, then the case for the inclusion of popular culture material into the American Studies curriculum should be able to set up a meaningful relation to highbrow culture, one that is not primarily polemical or antagonistic and does not justify one kind of culture at the expense of another but tries to understand how they interact and complement one another. This is what I want to suggest in my following remarks.²

2 One aspect of this story which I shall not discuss here is "the dialogue between high modern art and certain aspects of popular culture, such as advertising, graffiti, comics, and caricature," as demonstrated in the 1990 exhibition "High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" and documented in the catalogue of this exhibition edited by Kirk Vamedoe and Adam Gopnick, *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990. This project was instrumental in revising a view of high modernism as uncontaminated, pure, and "authentic" art form. But in focusing on how modernist masterpieces "had expanded the language of art in this century by drawing on contemporary vernacular sources," popular culture is still treated as basically a form of source material.

Obviously, the contrast of different levels of culture and the existence of cultural hierarchies, such as the opposition between aristocratic culture and folk culture, has a long history of its own. Still, it makes sense to argue that the phenomenon we label popular culture emerged in the second half of the 19th century in the wake of industrialization and its sweeping transformation of all aspects of life.³ In his study *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine has shown how the cultural system in the United States began to harden into separate spheres and taste levels in the period after the Civil War, reflecting, on the one side, new cultural aspirations of the gentry and an emerging middle class and, on the other, the tastes of an urban lower class in search of amusement and strong thrills.⁴ For this emergence of cultural hierarchy, Levine provides exhaustive and often hilariously funny material. His argument is perhaps most convincing in his chapter on the sacralization of musical performances in which German conductors play an especially ominous role as enforcers of cultural discipline, starting with an early period in which concerts were still "boisterous affairs" and classical music had to compete with monkeys, jugglers, and other attractions in a circus atmosphere, up to a policy of "no compromise" at the turn of the century in which strict silence was required and enforced. Inevitably, however, such "purification" of culture strengthens, by the logic of its own mechanism of exclusion, the very opposite against which it defines itself, because, in losing its cultural respectability and the offi-

Varmedoe/Gopnick, "Introduction," *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High & Low*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990, p. 11.

3 This statement needs qualification. I do not mean to say that popular culture did not exist before but that the division between the two cultural realms became institutionalized in this period. Industrialization as well as the emergence of large urban centers played a role in this by making mass production possible. Conceptually, the Romantic elevation of the work of art to the level of a supreme embodiment of human potential was crucial. The case is perhaps clearest in music, as Michael Broyles has pointed out in his book *'Music of the Highest Class': Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992.

4 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988. As is well known, some of the most important institutions of American high culture were founded in the period after the Civil War, among them the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Opera Company, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. On this point see Paul DiMaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," *Media, Culture and Society: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Collins et al. London: Sage, 1986, pp. 194-211.

cial approval of the custodians of culture, this other kind of culture is set free to develop in its own sphere of influence. A new urban entertainment culture emerged and soon began to flourish in the U.S. This culture is a culture of performance in a specific sense - a culture in which the sensational spectacle, the outstanding performance, the extraordinary physical and acrobatic achievement (the strongest man, the flying man on the trapeze), the intense emotional thrill (the wildest animal, the last minute rescue), a special attraction, striking appearance, or simply the rare presence of a celebrity become primary sources of attraction and gratification.⁵

This story of cultural hierarchization, as told by many, but most forcefully by Levine, fits all the requirements and expectations of the oedipal highbrow/lowbrow (melo)drama as told by Popular Culture Studies. On the one hand, we find an unrelenting, stern Victorian authority, on the other, a happily uninhibited child named Leslie; on the one side, repression is institutionalized, while "good, clean fun" is persecuted by unrelenting elitist forces on the other. Such a story has some serious shortcomings, however: Trapped in its own anti-elitist and anti-establishment narrative, it describes American cultural history and American culture of the period in a way that is neither very discerning, nor very precise. In particular, it fails to acknowledge, as Philip Fisher has shown in another context, an element that distinguishes American culture from European cultural history and provides much of the special interest American culture, high or low, has created in Europe: In contrast to European high culture, American culture is characterized by an aesthetics of performance on all of its different taste levels, including many of its most characteristic and original forms.⁶ Indeed, what makes American culture particularly interesting is that taste levels and aesthetic forms were never separated as categorically as in Europe and that, as a consequence, it is characterized by a constant mixture and hybridization of aesthetic modes and forms of expression. This mixed, hybrid character with its

5 Still the best comprehensive survey of the emergence of this urban culture of performance is given by Russell Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America*. New York: Dial, 1970, Part Two: "The Popular Theater."

6 On this point, see especially Fisher's essay "Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture," *Reconstructing American Literary History*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986, pp. 155-88.

connotations of "impurity" as well as lack of aesthetic control was, after all, one of the reasons why American culture was long considered inferior by many Europeans. But it was also one of the reasons why it was considered subversive and surprisingly "modern" by another group of Europeans.

Many examples could be given for the strong fascination these hybrid forms which did not fit established standards of high culture have exerted (and still exert) over the European imagination. I am thinking of a tradition of American literature that had long been considered juvenile or aesthetically inferior. Books by writers such as C. B. Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, or Melville, the female tradition in domestic fiction, or genres like the captivity and the slave narrative come to mind. The most imposing and glaring case, however, is presented by an author who, very fittingly, was always regarded as one of the most conspicuously American writers, Mark Twain. It is, of course, part of the strong interest his work and his person still hold today that he rejected established aesthetic and cultural hierarchies. As Fisher points out, performance was a central category for him, both in his life and in his writing. Few people will know what writers like Cooper or Melville actually looked like. But we all know the characteristic appearance of Mark Twain. This appearance was skillfully planned and carefully cultivated. Not only in his public lectures, Twain was an early master of impression-management who staged his public appearances very self-consciously. (Undoubtedly, the fact that he came from journalism helped in this regard.) In this respect, he was one of the first genuine stars of American culture in the modern sense of the word. At the same time, performance, the clever trick, the skillful manipulation, and the deadpan lie, form an obsessive focus in his writings and lie at the bottom of their structural problems. In his most ambitious and most programmatic novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, this obsession literally takes over the book and, in the process of doing so, reveals one of the main attractions and gratifications of performance as a cultural act: If successful, performance provides distinction and helps the individual to stand out from the multitude. Twain's novel is a crucial document of American cultural history because it effectively dramatizes the highly paradoxical interdependence between a culture of performance and a democratic society. A society whose members seem to become increasingly alike in

status inevitably creates a desire to be different and to distinguish oneself from the rest of one's fellow citizens.⁷

The growing obsession with conspicuousness, that is, with an identity built on professional, social, or cultural one-upmanship, is the theme of some of the best American art of the Gilded Age. In some cases, it is just acknowledged as an important, but deplorable trend in American life, as in the realistic novels of Howells, James, or Fuller in which the unprincipled newspaper journalist, always in search of the spectacular event, stands in contrast to the moral integrity of the gentleman and the innocent "American girl." In other cases, however, as in Twain's elevation of the vernacular character to the level of (almost) omnipotent trickster, or in Eakins' stubbornly professional surgeons and sportsmen who, self-assured and competent, present their skills to an anonymous audience; or in Dreiser's heroes and heroines with weak identities who reinvent themselves by means of looking around and slipping into the role of others, performance becomes a crucial source of identity and meaning in the text, as well as a distinguishing feature, of the text. These three, following in the footsteps of Emerson and Whitman, form the nucleus of an American tradition that must be seen as part of a culture of performance which explodes established dichotomies between highbrow and lowbrow, high culture and popular culture.⁸

The next important chapter in the history of an emerging culture of performance is, in my opinion, the silent film in which the relation between two central levels of signification - the narrative level, as a traditional literary device of providing meaning, and the level of performance, comprising physical skills, star presence, spectacular events, and special effects - is dramatically rearranged in hierarchy. In

7 This hunger for conspicuousness in a democratic society has been described by observers of American democracy such as Tocqueville and Veblen. What makes Twain's book unique is that it offers something like a diary of the battle between the striving for democracy on the one side and the wish for individual distinction on the other. I have traced this struggle in detail in my essay "The Restructuring of History and the Intrusion of Fantasy in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," *Forms and Functions of History in American Literature*, ed. W. Fluck, J. Peper, and Willi Paul Adams. Berlin: Schmidt Vg., 1981, pp. 134-148.

8 In this sense, Levine's story of hierarchization, useful as it may be as a description of the cultural aspirations of the American gentry of the East, ignores a crucial part of American cultural history and is in need of revision.

those early, anarchic slapstick comedies on which the high esteem of silent movies is based, the purpose of the narrative, usually a loosely structured, open-ended chase, is to provide a wide and sufficiently flexible framework for a serial linkage of spectacular effects and performances, so that those early comedians are admired as much for the artistic competence and skill with which they performed their tricks as for their particular brand of humor. It is not only in slapstick comedy, however, that the silent film is primarily a cinema of performance. Because no soundtrack was available, the communication of meaning depended heavily on melodramatic gestures, facial expression, acrobatic effects, or on overpowering visual strategies, as in the cross-cutting at the conclusion of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* which, despite the unmistakable racism of the scene, has impressed generations of cinéastes as a spectacular achievement. This famous episode also confirms my thesis in other ways. In the silent film, conflicts are not solved by psychological insight or moral conversion, as they are in the 19th century novel, but by the power of performance, that is, by a touching gesture, a final jump, or the last minute rescue. This performative mode is one of the reasons for the immense popularity and reputation which the silent film gained, because the language of performance is a universal language that can be communicated without words. At the same time, a restricted mode of communication has to maximize its own resources. This, in turn, explains the high degree of artistic self-consciousness and preoccupation with the language of film in the early cinema which contributed to its reputation as a new and "lively" art.

All of this changed with the introduction of sound. To be sure, the popularity of the cinema increased even further. But its high esteem among intellectuals disappeared almost completely, so that the Hollywood film after 1930 became a much maligned object of scorn, and was habitually dismissed as a standardized factory product. As Thomas Elsaesser reminds us,

in the 1920s, the cinema, including the American cinema (Griffith, Stroheim, Chaplin), enjoyed an enormous intellectual prestige, condensed in many a weighty volume on film aesthetics and theory published during the decade. They unanimously hailed a new art, which they assumed to have almost magical possibilities [...] the in-

vention of sound at the end of the 1920s dashed this euphoria once and for all.⁹

In aesthetic terms, this abandonment of film by the intellectuals had a fairly simple but interesting reason. The primarily performative mode of the silent film had held considerable interest for modernist aesthetics in its fight against the authority of Victorian realism. With the introduction of sound, the Hollywood film seemed to retreat again to traditional literary forms of narration and realistic representation, without, however, coming close to the sophistication in characterization, narrative structure, and authorial perspective which 19th century realism had already reached.

Worried by the way the cinema was more and more forcefully developing in the direction of a realist-representational medium given over to narratives of dubious merit and originality, artists in the modernist vein came to regard the cinema as aesthetically reactionary, a throw-back in fact to the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Compared to the refinement and complexity of a novel by Tolstoi, Flaubert, or James, the Hollywood film looked "low" indeed, like a pitiful, superficial version of 19th century psychological realism. A familiar style of film criticism focusing on clichés and stereotypes established itself and is still very much alive today. The dichotomy between high and low, which had broken down in view of the silent film, reasserted itself more strongly than ever before. For most intellectuals and for highbrow culture in general, the Hollywood film was beneath contempt.

It took some French intellectuals around the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who had the courage of their convictions and, in addition,

9 Thomas Elsaesser, "Two Decades in Another Country: Hollywood and the Cinéphiles," *Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby. London: Elek, 1975, p. 201. On the one hand, the introduction of sound had the effect that film became more respectable for those members of the middle class for whom the melodramatic excess of the silent film looked old-fashioned. But the new type of film looked decidedly middle-brow to most intellectuals, which was the kiss of death for its cultural prestige. As Varnedoe and Gopnick demonstrated in their exhibition "High & Low," intellectuals were strongly interested in popular culture in the modernist period, but only in those outlandish, "vulgar" forms that violated middle-class taste and thus had a welcome shock effect.

10 Elsaesser, *ibid.*, p. 201.

that French flair for a rhetoric that sounds both interestingly obscure and obscurely interesting to correct that mistake. Whatever one thinks of the intellectual merits of the defense of Hollywood by the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the achievement of this group in changing European and, eventually also American, attitudes toward popular culture can hardly be overestimated. Usually, this achievement has been connected with the so-called auteur theory whose weaknesses have been mercilessly criticized. In my opinion, another aspect of the French argument for the Hollywood film is much more substantial because it did not tie its case to the idea of the director as writer but to the specific potential of the medium film itself. For this, film had to be liberated from the stigma of being nothing but another form of watered-down 19th century literary realism. The shift in attitude toward Hollywood which André Bazin and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* brought about rested, therefore, in the final analysis, on a basic but perceptive redefinition, or, if you want, a clever category change: Film, it was argued, deserves our attention because it is precisely not a form of literature, or, more specifically, of 19th century realism, but a supreme manifestation of a new aesthetic phenomenon which may be called phenomenological realism in the sense that film can communicate directly, and almost unconsciously, by virtue of the power of its images.¹¹ Seen in this way, the reality effect of the film is heightened by the addition of sound because the text appears more natural and no longer draws attention to itself as a system of signification - which, in turn, means that the viewer is set free to focus on the arrangement and inner organization of the image or shot itself (its *mise-en-scène*). In contrast to 19th century realism, the reality effect of the classical Hollywood film thus does not primarily rest in, and depend on, elaborate authorial guidance on the level of characterization and narrative structure (which, because of the requirements of the action movie and its fast-paced narration, are hardly ever nuanced). Rather, it is one of the advantages of film that it can provide narrative continuity without a nar-

11 Cf. Elsaesser's description of Bazin's argument in favor "of what he himself called the 'phenomenological' approach to filmed reality. Applied polemically, his crucial argument was intended to separate those film-makers who, like Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov, 'tampered' with reality because of their didactic intentions, from those who 'respected' the continuity of action as it appears in 'real life' and who deployed the temporal-narrative dimension of the cinema instead of searching out and experimenting with its conceptual-analytical possibilities." "Two Decades in Another Country," p. 202f.

rator. The reporting is done by the camera lens (an effect Camus, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Hammett, and others tried to realize in literature), thus producing an effect of "impersonal vision" reminiscent of Hemingway's famous sequence of motion and fact with its promise of a new immediacy and authenticity of aesthetic experience. Where literature strives at such effects, it has to become experimental, while the same effect comes naturally to the film as a medium. In order to make the best possible use of its own potential, film therefore has to eliminate forms of communication that rely on overt philosophical or moral guidance. This, in fact, is what the Hollywood film does best. Such a redefinition of film as a form of phenomenological realism quite logically leads up to the auteur theory, which is, after all, a method of locating meaning and cultural value in indirect modes of communication.

One of the films best suited to exemplify and clarify this line of reasoning is, in my opinion, *The Big Sleep* (1946) by Howard Hawks. It can be safely said that after the rescue and rediscovery of the Hollywood film, *The Big Sleep* has become one of the most popular and most highly regarded American films ever.¹² Everybody seems to like the film, and yet, few have anything significant or enlightening to say about it. Somewhat surprisingly, the major tone in the criticism of the film is anecdotal. As a result, discussions usually reshuffle and rearrange the same old bits and pieces of gossip and basic information: the observation that the plot does not always make sense and that even Hawks and Chandler lost track of who committed the murder of Owen Taylor; the obligatory reference to the special chemistry between Bogart and Bacall on film and in real life; an allusion to the strained relations between the sexes after the War and so on and so forth. The fact that many things are mentioned and tried out as explanations but none seem to be able to carry the argument is significant in itself. It is an indication that the film and its effect cannot easily be reduced to a structural or thematic center of the text.

12 See James Monaco, writing in the 1970s at the time of the rediscovery of *film noir*: "There are other examples of the genre which might now be more popular, but Howard Hawks' film is the fullest, richest and most resonant. No wonder, then, that interest in it has renewed and intensified now, almost thirty years later. There was something about the feel of those 1940s private eye films - and *The Big Sleep* most of all - that we find strangely attractive in the 1970s." "Notes on *The Big Sleep*, thirty years after," *Sight and Sound*, 44:1 (1974/75), 35.

This may sound questionable because we all know that *The Big Sleep* is a detective film in the *film noir* tradition and has often been used to illustrate some of the characteristic features of this tradition. In its thematic focus on the assertion of male independence and moral integrity, as well as in its dramatization of the threat to that integrity by the forces of sex, money, and power, the film acts out a familiar moral and emotional melodrama, often in typical *noir* night scenes and scenery. However, largely because of the influence of Hawks, I assume, the film does not stage this drama with the same melodramatic pathos as, for example, movies inspired by James Cain. Its story is not one of inevitable corruption and painful self-destruction. Instead, there is a good deal of irony and self-irony which works toward a de-melodramatization of the *noir*-material, while on the visual level the strong expressionism of many *noir* movies gives way to a far less emphatic surface realism which fits the needs of a fast-paced action movie.¹³ All of this helps to undermine the melodramatic structure and emotional grip of the typical *noir* film. What we get instead are individual scenes, especially in the encounter of Bogart with Bacall and other women, that seem to come out of a screwball comedy and are pure performance with very little or hardly any function for the film as a whole.¹⁴

It is this mixture of genres and styles that makes the film pleasant but also somewhat inconclusive to watch. In discussions of the film, one aspect is thus mentioned again and again: a widely shared sense of confused causalities and the fact that one occasionally loses track of how the individual episodes are linked to each other. Many critics, in one way or another, have described the film as "immensely enjoyable but [...] quite obscure."¹⁵ If we have difficulties in connecting scenes

13 Andrew Sarris notes Hawks' tendency "to veer away from dramatization and verbalization of feelings that are implicit in the action." This tendency is supported by his technique: "His tracking, cutting, and framing have never attracted much attention in themselves [...]." *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*. New York: Dutton, 1968, p. 54f.

14 James Monaco calls *The Big Sleep* "a kind of second-generation screwball comedy" and "the ultimate Bogart-Bacall film," "Notes on *The Big Sleep*," 38. A similar shift of balance within the hard boiled genre can already be observed in Hawks' film version of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not* which immediately preceded *The Big Sleep* and established Bogart-Bacall as a couple.

15 Annette Kuhn, "The *Big Sleep*: Censorship, Film Text and Sexuality," *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge, 1985, p. 77.

and episodes logically, however, this means that they become decontextualized. They do not primarily derive their meaning and justification from how well they are integrated into a narrative and emotional whole but have to rely on the impact which they themselves can create.¹⁶ This decontextualization is basically the consequence of two kinds of influence and decision-making. Monaco claims that much of the illogic of the film is due to cuts which were made in order to conform to the Hollywood Production Code. These omissions included political points and motivations provided in Chandler's novel. In addition, "Hawks felt that the basic premise of *The Big Sleep* was not the mystery, not the figure of the private eye, but the tense and equal relationship between Humphrey Bogart and his 'discovery,' Lauren Bacall."¹⁷ For this purpose, scenes were added to the plot:

To emphasize leading lady Bacall as Vivian, Hawks and his writers placed her in three scenes in which she does not appear in the novel (Marlowe returning Carmen to her home, his visit to Brody's apartment, his incarceration in Realito at the hands of Mars's man Canino); they lengthened one encounter from the book (Vivian's visit to Marlowe's office), and added one long scene that appears only in the film.¹⁸

The main attraction of the film thus does not lie primarily in a particular genre pattern, moral drama, or emotional structure but in the performative power of the single scene:

Hawks has explained many times in interviews that he thinks the scene is the basic unit to film-making: do the scene well and audiences won't care about the rest. Talking about *The Big Sleep* he once said, "We made a picture that worked pretty well [...] and I never figured out what was going on, but I thought the basic thing had *great scenes* in it and it was good entertainment" [my italics].¹⁹

16 Hawks' characteristic visual style effectively supports this domination of the scene: "Hawks will work within a frame as much as possible, cutting only when a long take or an elaborate track might distract his audience from the issues in the foreground of the action. This is good, clean, direct, functional cinema, perhaps the most distinctly American cinema of all." *The American Cinema*, p. 55.

17 Monaco, "Notes on *The Big Sleep*," 37.

18 Roger Shatzkin, "Who Cares Who Killed Owen Taylor?" *The Modern American Novel and the Movies*, ed. Gerald Peary and Roger Shatzkin. New York: Ungar, 1978, p. 91f.

19 Monaco, "Notes on *The Big Sleep*," 37.

In the effective economy of its "functional perfection" (C. Chabrol),²⁰ *The Big Sleep*, in its own way, thus anticipates and illustrates a shift from narrative to performance as a primary source of effect and gratification. This explains why the film has not aged. It also explains why the film in the often anecdotal and disjointed discussions of it lives on primarily through its visual surface and its iconographic elements: typical gestures, appearances, and mannerisms, the inevitable cigarette, the hot house, the constant rain, the artificial city. What matters is not the story of moral and cultural decay but the mood that is communicated. In this sense, *The Big Sleep* can be seen as a classical vanguard movie which anticipates the victory of mood over moral structure in contemporary culture.²¹ In this context, it is significant that the iconography of the film has become part of a semiotic repertoire of what may be called neon realism, together with another immensely popular recent "rediscovery" of American culture, the painter Edward Hopper. It is hardly accidental that the popularity of both of these cultural phenomena peaked in the 1970s at a time when a new surface or sharp focus realism established itself which, in its focus on decontextualized images, bears striking similarities to postmodern strategies of dehierarchization and decontextualization.²²

20 "There is no doubt that the superiority of *The Big Sleep* derives in part from the quite functional perfection achieved by director and scriptwriters; the plot of the film is a model of the thriller equation, with three unknowns (the blackmailer, the murderer, the avenger), so simple and so subtle that at first all is beyond comprehension [...]." Claude Chabrol, "Evolution of the Thriller," *Cahiers du Cinéma. The 1950's: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. J. Hillier. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985, p. 161.

21 This victory of mood over moral structure explains the anger and lack of interest of an otherwise perceptive critic such as Robin Wood (in his liberal, pre-liberationist days) who writes on *The Big Sleep*: "Its reputation has grown out of all proportion to its achievement [...]." However, what for Wood is the major weakness of the film, turned out to be one of its strengths: "The question of style and method is crucial [...]. The book is narrated in the first person by Marlowe [...]. At no point and in no way does Hawks attempt a visual equivalent for this style [...]. For Hawks, unlike Chandler and Montgomery, releases us from Marlowe's consciousness, presenting action and characters (Marlowe included) with his customary objectivity. Besides, what we have is not so much Bogart acting Marlowe as Marlowe becoming Bogart." Howard Hawks. London: BFI, 1981, p. 168f.

22 On this point of comparison, see my essay "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction," *Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Kristiaan Versluys. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992, pp. 65-85.

Postmodernism, arriving with the transitional phenomenon called camp sensibility, has changed our attitude toward popular culture (and thus also its standing in intellectual discussions). In the post-modern co-existence of a diversity of voices and styles, high and low merge in new and unforeseen ways and lead to a wide array of cultural crossovers. The uses high art makes of certain forms of popular culture have blurred the boundaries between the two. At the same time, contemporary American popular culture has become increasingly self-ironical and self-referential.²³ The dichotomy between high and low was, in the final analysis, a product of modernism, a logical consequence of modernism's search for aesthetic autonomy and existential authenticity. In this search for authenticity, certain American novels of the hard-boiled school, many of them considered as trash in the United States, became of interest for modernist writers and critics in Europe, because, in their fatalism and apparent nihilism, they signalled an existential honesty and force that the leading genre of 19th century psychological realism, the novel of manners, seemed to lack.²⁴ Again the French took the lead. Writers like Sartre, Camus, Malraux and Gide praised Hammett, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wright, Chandler, even the likes of James Cain and Horace McCoy. In her seminal study of "the age of the American novel,"²⁵ Claude-Edmonde Magny was one of the first to describe the modernity of this literary tradition and to link it to film. Not accidentally, books and stories of many of these writers have served as favorite sources for film scripts in the *noir*-tradition. Such intertextual and intermedial exchanges rest on an affinity that goes beyond fashionable currents of the time. What is more significant is the fact that both of these traditions are connected by what I have called phenomenological realism.

The best explanation and interpretation of this tradition is, in my opinion, not provided by André Bazin or the critics of the *Cahiers du*

23 Cf. Michael Dunne, *Metapop: Self-Referentiality in Contemporary American Popular Culture*. Jackson, Miss.: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1992. See also my essay "Fiction and Fictionality in Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 21:4 (1988), 59ff.

24 Monaco claims that "Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, especially in his portrayal of Bogart, was the epitome of the existential hero of the late Thirties and early Forties [...]." "Notes on *The Big Sleep*," 35.

25 Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two Wars*. New York: Ungar, 1972 (first published in French in 1948 under the title *L'âge du roman américain*).

Cinéma, nor by discussions of the hard-boiled school in American literature, but by the work of the German scholar Jürgen Peper who, in a cultural history of the novel in his book *Bewußtseinslagen des Erzählens*, as well as in subsequent essays, provides a penetrating analysis of that post-naturalistic phase in literature for which writers like Faulkner or books like Camus' *L'Étranger* are supreme examples.²⁶ With a wealth of material and fine observations, Peper points out the many striking analogies in the development of painting, music, and the shift toward phenomenology in philosophy which make the movement toward a phenomenological realism part of a wider movement in cultural history. Peper's point is that this stage of artistic production is part of a cultural history of dehierarchization and democratization that has its latest manifestation in the radically dehierarchized condition of post-modern culture. My point is that popular culture, in its own shift of emphasis from narrative to performative level as the primary source of meaning and gratification - a shift which I have sketched with reference to film, but which could be traced in other media such as popular literature, music, television, advertising, sports, or clothes quite as easily - is not only part of this development but one of its crucial elements and driving forces.²⁷ While high culture, partly in reaction to the emergence of popular culture, defined itself as a realm of cultural exploration and aesthetic innovation, popular culture, propelled by technological progress and a merciless market, pursued its own drive for an intensification of aesthetic expression and a maximizing of aesthetic effect. Its development resembles that of high art in its basic direction and characteristic stages in striking ways and

26 Jürgen Peper, *Bewußtseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten*. Leiden: Brill, 1966, as well as Peper's essay "Das Zeitalter der heuristischen Epoche," *Working Paper*, Nr. 31. Berlin: J. F. Kennedy-Institut, 1991. Some of Peper's essays are about to be published under the title "Zu einer demokratischen Ästhetik" ("Towards a Democratic Aesthetic").

27 Although Peper was the first German Americanist to publish on Marshall McLuhan, his view of popular culture seems to be limited to the notion of *Trivialisierung*, that is, to a view in which popular culture functions only as insipid imitation and trivialization of high art. However, the history of American popular culture is by no means that of a belated, watered-down imitation of high culture. Such forms as vaudeville and the musical, comic strips, the gradual "Africanization" of popular music and dance, or the development of film and television constitute a media culture of performance which has established unique and powerful forms of its own (often in interaction with African-American and other ethnic cultures). Today we have reached a point where this development has begun to affect and transform all cultural levels.

much more so than most cultural historians are willing to concede. This, in turn, may explain a striking fact of that cultural history: Contrary to Levine's and most Popular Culture Studies' versions, we witness today not an increasing cultural hierarchy for which late 19th century lay the seed but, quite on the contrary, a growing carnivalization of culture.²⁸

Carnevalization means that the strict dichotomy between high and low has broken down and that the freedom in combining signs and discourses from different cultural realms has increased. It does not mean that high and popular culture have become alike. Nor do I want to obscure the considerable differences that exist between these cultural realms, because they have their own history and logic of development. In high art, deliberate experimentation has been at the center of this development, while in popular culture the search for popular appeal and a mass market seems to be the major driving force. In high culture, originality, uniqueness, and innovation are central values. In contrast, popular culture relies on conventions. Genre formulas, standardized plot patterns, and stereotyping ensure a high degree of recognition and remain crucial elements of popular acceptance and success. In its denial of identification and its ever more radical strategies of defamiliarization, high art has become increasingly difficult and hermetic, while popular culture has secured its wide appeal by shrewdly undermining cultural barriers to instant gratification and immediate experience.

In a way, then, these two areas of cultural production could not be further apart, and yet there also exists a striking similarity between

28 In a review of the book, Sven Birkerts rightly points out that "the real weakness of the concluding section lies in its avoidance of the question of postmodernism. For what is postmodernism in our present-day culture but a concerted attack upon hierarchy, an attempted shattering of the high/low distinctions that have been applied to genres and cultural products? Andy Warhol, Robert Venturi, Philip Glass, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Wilson, and a throng of others have in the last decades worked to sabotage the very alignments that Levine has been tracking so carefully. To conclude such a stimulating excursus with thoughts about the present state of things while ignoring this latest current-shift is to deprive oneself - and one's readers - of resolution. Levine has a fine eye for cultural nuance and for the sweep of larger historical dynamics. He should look more searchingly at the present to see how his saga continues." *American Energies: Essays on Fiction*. New York: Morrow, 1992, p. 85.

them: both are part of a history of individualization and democratization.²⁹ As Peper argues convincingly, high culture's focus on formal experimentation can best be understood as a project that stands in the service of epistemological dehierarchization. This project begins with the Romantic rejection of mimesis and the emphatic emancipation and self-empowerment of the individual through art. While reason still reigns supreme in enlightenment art and in classicism, intuition, feeling, sense impressions, stream of consciousness, "neutral camera eye," instinctual drives, sexuality and the body, and finally, in post-modern art, the imaginary supersede each other as privileged perspectives of world-making in an increasingly radical critique of logocentrism. With each of these stages, mimesis becomes more problematic and untenable. Artists shift their interest from subject matter to form and, finally, to the material itself. Representations become fragmented, while single elements and material components of aesthetic experience - sense impressions, mood, color, line, picture plane, space, time, image, melody, rhythm, tone, "noise," language, verbal signifier, and, finally, the presentation of linguistic material in typographical form - are liberated from their former function in the service of a moral or philosophical message in order to explore their potential for aesthetic experience independently and without moral or social burden.

Quite obviously, popular culture is not driven by the same epistemological and aesthetic ambitions. If the conventional sells, then this is good enough. But it is also true that the same old song does not always sell. On the contrary, it quickly loses its sales appeal. For different reasons, popular culture thus cannot rest comfortably in convention either. Out of completely different motives - the race for artistic originality on the one side, a merciless market on the other - an analogous pressure for constant innovation is at work, so that

29 In the following argument I use the term individual in the plain sense of a reference to single persons and citizens who define themselves through the pursuit of their own rights and interests. (Whether this individual can be called a "subject" in the sense of philosophical idealism or whether such sense of identity is only a discursive effect cannot, and need not, be discussed in this context.) "Individualization," then, refers to a process in which individuals manage to escape social hierarchies which stand in the way of self-realization and liberate themselves from social and moral demands made on them.

each medium and genre within popular culture [...] has its own cycle of innovation and conventionalization [...] The big success, the really notable break-through in the history of popular culture has always been that which has managed to establish a new textual variant, if not a new textual model; in doing this, it has also set up a new paradigm of psychic negotiation and semantic combination.³⁰

On the level of short-term goals, this pressure leads to continuous, though often superficial product innovation within established media and genres. What I am interested in here, is how technological development has fueled and accelerated this process. In the final analysis, it is not continuous product innovation but a quick succession of new technological possibilities of expression which provide the most convincing explanation of popular culture's amazing appeal and ever growing cultural importance. Ironically enough, this story is closely connected with what critics call the "conventional dimension" of popular culture. From the perspective of experimentalism, the term convention carries connotations of laziness, passivity, and lack of artistic ambition and is thus automatically equated with the conventional. Popular culture, it is argued, employs conventions because it wants to minimize effort. From the point of view of communication theory, however, the purpose and usefulness of convention lies in the fact that it ensures a common basis of understanding. Technically speaking, this drive for a common language is one of the prerequisites of popular culture's effectiveness and success. The more universal the language, the greater the potential appeal and popularity.

The cultural history of popular culture is thus also the history of an ongoing search for an ever more effective universal language. In the Romantic discovery (and reinvention) of folk art, the possibility of a common language between intellectuals and the common folk emerged. In part, however, this common language was still linked to a national culture whose customs, language, and history one had to know intimately in order to appreciate folk culture's wisdom. In the emergence of a dime novel tradition of adventure tales and domestic romances and the sensationalism of the yellow press narrative conventions were developed which did no longer depend on specifics of national rhetoric or style and could easily be translated into other languages or media without losing their appeal. In melodrama, vaude-

30 Fluck, "Fiction and Fictionality in Popular Culture," 56f.

ville, burlesque, and eventually the silent film, gesture and performance became, although to a varying degree, a common basis of understanding that successfully managed to address and integrate a whole new audience of often illiterate immigrants. As Andrews notes: "The case of the 'film formula' of the twenties and thirties is even more striking considering that in America alone 50-70 million people went to the movies each week. They watched a language which had triumphed over all other possibilities and which reinforced its supremacy with every new film."³¹

At the same time, the new medium film and parallel technological developments in broadcasting and recording mark the beginning of a form of cultural production in which image and sound become dominant means of communication and persuasion. What was originally part of one "show," gains institutional and aesthetic independence and begins to maximize its own possibilities of expression. In film, this development has resulted in an increasing aestheticization through such formal and technical devices as narrative ellipsis, the decontextualization of images, slow motion, repetition, freeze endings, quick cutting, or double exposure. By now, this aestheticization has reached a point where its techniques and strategies increasingly resemble those of contemporary advertising. In music, this search for, and gradual liberation and technological enhancement of, those elements which are aesthetically most effective finds its parallel in a growing dominance of rhythm over melodies which still tell stories and link mood to subject matter. In contemporary rap music, this rhythmic base is taken to an even more elementary level by mixing it with sounds from recording and playing equipment in a way that is reminiscent of the deliberate recycling of verbal "trash" in postmodern writers like Barthelme or Pynchon.³² In other strategies of aesthetic intensification, visual and musical effects are combined to enhance each other's appeal. When sound was added to film, this addition increased the semiotic complexity of the film but also its usefulness for telling stories. When television began to absorb this function and film found itself in a crisis, it was challenged to focus more strongly on what it

could do best. A phase of experimenting with various technological gimmicks began, until the industry consolidated itself through its own possibilities for enhancing sense experience by combining visual and musical elements in new, video clip type of ways and for maximum effect. In the video clip itself, a way has been found to use a sequence of fleeting images in order to intensify the suggestive power of the music.

In all of these developments, the basic thrust is the same: Mimesis is dissolved by a logic of aestheticization, subject matter counts less than intense sense experience, narrative is replaced by performance. Moral and social contexts are pushed aside in the search for new and ever stronger effects. In the liberation of canvas, linguistic material, image and sound, moral and social hierarchies disappear. Aesthetic dehierarchization thus does not only go hand in hand with cultural and social dehierarchization, it has actually become one of its driving forces. The story of art since the rise of the novel in the 18th century is also the story of an increasing social emancipation of the individual which found in fiction a welcome imaginary space for the purpose of self-definition and self-enhancement. Starting with Romanticism, art has served as a privileged form of authorization in a series of radical declarations of independence by the individual in which violations of social and aesthetic norms were justified in the name of individual freedom of expression. One of the motives that gave high modernism its force and heroic self-image was its vehement fight against the pressures of a social consensus that threatened to suffocate the individual. In this sense, modern art, contrary to its image in Popular Culture Studies, is not the cultural voice of a snobbish elitism, but, quite on the contrary, a culture of liberation from the Victorian system of culture in which artistic expression was still tied to moral norms. Modernism, in other words, must be seen as a major force of democratization in this century from whose battle for freedom of expression of sexual and other seemingly "amoral" or "asocial" urges all members of society have profited.

This liberation has its price. The greater the freedom of individual expression, the greater also the distance to such "old-fashioned" concepts as social or moral responsibility. On the one side, quite in accordance with its own self-image, modernism can indeed be seen as a

31 J. Dudley Andrews, *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976, p. 176.

32 On this point, see Richard Shusterman, "The Fine Art of Rap," *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 613-632.

deeply humanistic art in the sense that it insists on the worth of each and every individual, however marginalized and low he or she may be. At the same time, it is also an eminently "asocial" art in the sense that this liberation of the individual acknowledges no social boundaries (and immediately protests against censorship when such boundaries are being discussed or demanded). While socially stigmatized impulses were still effectively "regulated" in classic art, many examples of modern art insist on the individual's inalienable right to express his or her own most private obsessions and drives.³³ It may be safely said that it has become one of the main functions of modern art to focus on the articulation of a wide array of elementary drives and impulses such as anger, rage, violence, sexual desire, even incestuous longings, paranoia, and the temptation or even right to kill. Significantly, the criminal and the psychopath have become culture heroes of modernist literature.³⁴

A similar movement, in which an anarchic and asocial core of our fantasies is gradually liberated from its moral and social context, also characterizes the cultural history of popular culture (which has made it the second major target of censorship measures besides modern experimental art).³⁵ The increasing glorification and banalization of sex

33 For a fine description of this 'regulation' in the work of Jane Austen, see D. W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," *Scrutiny*, 8 (1940), 346-362.

34 A striking case is provided by Norman Mailer who suggested to divorce oneself from society by encouraging "the psychopath in oneself." What he had in mind, of course, was a philosophical psychopath who "possesses the narcissistic detachment of the philosopher, that absorption in the recessive nuances of one's motive which is so alien to the unreasoning drive of the psychopath." *Advertisements for Myself*. London, 1968, p. 271, 275. Clearly, Mailer's intellectualization of the role of the psychopath is designed to prevent a mimetic misunderstanding. Still, it is fascinating to see that high culture as well as popular culture are attracted by similar kinds of psychotic or schizoid characters who promise to escape the prison-house of the self and its life-long neuroses. In this search for liberation from neurotic imprisonment, contemporary high culture pursues a risky strategy of cancelling depth of characterization, and, in doing so, undermining "reasonable" forms of distance in order to expose the reader directly to an experience of openness and amorphousness.

35 Popular culture, in fact, has by now developed specialized genres for this purpose: "In an essay on 'excessive' film types (weepie melodrama, pornography, horror), Linda Williams determined that essential to the allure of these 'body' genres is their capacity to bring up unmitigated, unsocialized emotions - the extremes of feeling not elicited by pictures that take the straight and narrow path." Devin McKinney, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," *Film Quarterly*, 46:4 (1993), 17.

and violence in the mass media, in which "death constitutes no more than a momentary lull ending with a cutaway to the next sequence" and murder functions as "a mere relief of tension, a dully masturbatory act," has become an issue of major concern in Western societies.³⁶ But while Popular Culture Studies would probably be quite unwilling to acknowledge high modernism as a force of democratization, modernists would probably refuse to acknowledge that these developments of popular culture have anything to do with the "liberation" of the individual. After all, in high modernism, the goal is freedom of individual expression, while the mass media, at best, stand for freedom of consumption. "Consumption," however, is not a useful concept of cultural history, because it is an economic term for the process of reception which ignores the fact that this process has its own structure and meaning, and plays its own role in the "unleashing" of the individual by means of fiction and aesthetic experience which we are tracing here.

In her study of the American novel, Magny points to striking parallels between the form of reception required by novel and film. Both media address themselves to a mass audience effectively because they are especially well suited to invite intense imaginary participation. In contrast to the theater, for example, "both the novel and the film systematically seek out all means leading to the emotional fusion of the character and the audience."³⁷ For establishing this imaginary and emotional engagement, the form of reception is crucial. The lone reader in his own room resembles the spectator in the cinema in "the solitude of his own perception [...]. Emotional contagion is minimal at the movies, maximal at the theater." The individual is encouraged to withdraw and is set free in the darkness of the movie house to project his own wishes and anxieties onto the screen: "[...] many people see a

36 McKinney, *ibid.*, 17, 19. It is interesting to note in this context that a charge of violence for its own sake was already made against *The Big Sleep*, although the film appears tame in comparison with recent developments. In his book *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992, Robert Sklar quotes a contemporary critic writing in the *New York Times*: "It is this visual emphasis of toughness and malevolence on the screen that seems to this anxious observer to be quite ominous and painful today. For plainly it isn't employed toward any constructive end; it is just used to give the audience vicarious and sadistic thrills." (p. 174) As in contemporary mass media, this impression of violence for its own sake can be directly attributed to the loss of narrative context.

37 Magny, *The Age of the American Novel*, p. 8.

movie in the same way as they listen to music or read a novel: by projecting their personal dreams and aspirations onto the scenes unfolding before them, as if the screen [...] were only a point of departure, a support for the imagination."³⁸ Apart from the fact that Magny's argument quite convincingly bases the power of film not in its formulaic character but quite on the contrary in its opening up of an imaginary space for narcissistic projection, she also points to a trajectory from the novel (which became the first modern mass medium because of its possibilities of illusionism) to the film (which makes the semiotically most complex and effective use of the power of images) and on to music which has become the most popular medium of our time, because, in its vague suggestiveness, it is even better suited for the projection of diffuse longings of the self. With these developments, popular culture changes its function. Instead of serving as an instrument of socialization and integration into a social and ideological consensus, it provides an intense experience of fusion with an object of desire:

The very elements which have helped to make the film medium one of the most popular and effective in cultural history - its ability to combine several sign systems, its acceleration of the sequence of signs, and the ensuing flooding of the viewer's imagination - add up to a striking intensification of sense experience, but, at the same time, they also transform aesthetic experience into a process of ever shorter imaginary projection.³⁹

"Movies, despite the penis-envious treatises of academically oriented critics, offer the viewer no degree of imaginative co-authorship comparable to that in literature. The image, after all, is right there before you, concrete block-like in its sensual solidity."⁴⁰ Such angry insistence on a denial of imaginary co-authorship in the modern mass media seems to be the common wisdom on this topic in literary studies. While the history of high art, as told by reader response criticism and others, is that of a growing liberation of the reader, the major effect of the mass media is seen in a flooding and overwhelming of the

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18,19,20.

³⁹ Winfried Fluck, "Exchanges. Cultural Analysis and Networks of Relation," *America Seen From the Outside: Topics, Models, and Achievements of American Studies in the Federal Republic of Germany*, ed. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay and Heinz Jickstadt. Berlin: Kennedy-Institute, 1990, p. 108f.

⁴⁰ McKinney, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," 22.

imagination. However, the powerful effects of a movie by Hitchcock or Fritz Lang cannot be explained without the intense co-authorship of an anxious viewer who adds his or her own fears to what is shown (or often only suggested) on the screen. The issue is further complicated by the fact that recent technological developments have begun to put the viewer (or listener) in the position of sole author and to relegate the text to the status of co-authorship. In the shift from integrated narrative to an aesthetics of performance, some of the new media have indeed reached a point where the mere programming of sensations seems to have become more important than any semantic dimension. It is this loss of a semantic dimension, however, which also opens up new possibilities for the viewer to use the aesthetic object as a projection for his or her own narcissistic longings. For this purpose of imaginary projection, brief sequences of decontextualized scenes or emotionally suggestive images are most useful. This explains why film has been replaced in daily use by television and popular music. While a movie, even in its most contemporary form, still requires the viewer to stay with one text for 90 minutes or more, television as a medium has opened up new possibilities for the fragmentation and diffusion of aesthetic experience by the increasing number of channels and programs it offers simultaneously. In support of this development, new technological devices provide unforeseen opportunities in the combination of scenes and images by remote control so that, increasingly, the viewer will be able to produce his or her own sequence of decontextualized images and sounds. A similar invitation to pursue and "author" one's own imaginary longings is provided by the video-clip with its skillful collage of suggestive images. In this and other ways, the individual's freedom for imaginary projection is increased dramatically. As a result, "popular culture" nowadays no longer refers to a communality of values but has almost become synonymous in meaning with the uninhibited expression of personal life-style, individual taste, or private obsession.

Thus, underneath the "great divide" of high and popular culture lies a cultural history that reveals striking similarities in the general direction of development: on the aesthetic level, a movement from narrative to performance, from an integration of aesthetic elements to their increasing decontextualization and dehierarchization; on the social level, a growing elimination of moral and social guardianship and

a corresponding unleashing of individual self-expression and self-expansion by means of fiction. For Peper, this dehierarchization within the aesthetic object, as well as far as its function in society is concerned, paves the way for an ongoing process of democratization. Democratization, however, is not to be confused with democracy. The latter is most often used to evoke an idea of equality and justice, while the former, democratization, basically describes an increase in individual freedom and, linked with it, in the freedom of self-expression - a tendency and social attitude that may create problems of its own and may not always and necessarily be good for democracy. In this sense of a continuous dehierarchization and an ever increasing freedom of self-expression we may speak of a global Americanization of culture. We should add, however, that this process is one that affects American culture as much as other cultures (and even more so). If all of this is valid, this also changes the parameters of the popular culture debate. Popular culture is not, by definition, the champion of democracy. It is part of a cultural history of dehierarchization and democratization, of a culture of performance and self-expression that, depending on the context, may be either helpful or harmful for democracy (and sometimes both). At the same time, popular culture is not the shady underside of that development but very much part of it and increasingly even at the center of it. In order to deal with popular culture and to integrate it into the curriculum, one therefore does not have to appeal to a democratic sense of fairness, nor does one have to declare oneself to be one of the people. One simply has to go back to cultural history!