The Americanization of Modern Culture:
A Cultural History of the Popular Media[*]

I. Cultural Imperialism?

A few years ago, my wife and I took a trip to Malaysia. One of the things we wanted to see was the rain forest in the remote northern part of the country. We rented a car and drove north as far as we could, until all roads ended and the only way to go any further was by boat. The boat ride took five hours and was spectacular. Dense forests covered the banks of the river. Thick branches hung over the water, animals appeared and disappeared, and we couldn't help being drawn into a kind of "heart-of-darkness" fantasy. We knew that a native tribe was living at the end of the river, and we were discussing, with a curious blend of adventurous spirit and vague anxiety, what wondrous things to expect. Finally, we reached that remote part of the rain forest where one could not even go any further by boat. One of the natives was sitting at the landing-place. When he saw our boat, he got up in order to greet us. As we came closer, we realized that he did not wear the kind of native dress we had anticipated. On the contrary. He wore a T-shirt with a logo on it which said: *Chicago Bulls*.

Many other examples of a similar type could be given.[1] The signs of an increasing Americanization of cultures all over the world are unmistakable and

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[1] For an example closer to home, see the following clipping taken from a recent magazine article about a trip to France: "After lunch, we set off in search of his birthday present: an authentic French beret – the kind made of wool, lined, shaped with interfacing and built to last a lifetime. Such hats were not as plentiful as you'd imagine (unlike the Chicago Bulls caps we saw on every French teen)" *Living Fit* (May 1998): 120.

need not be spelt out here at length. No matter whether one goes to Moscow, the Mongolian steppe, rural India, or the rain forest of Malaysia: The cultural practices and forms one encounters are becoming more and more alike. This new global culture is "American" in the sense that even when it is produced in Hong Kong or Berlin, it is basically following American models. In the following essay, this growing "Americanization" of modern culture will be the starting point of my argument. I take it as a given, as something that has already become a reality and can hardly be reversed. The crucial question, then, is: How do we explain this development and what are our options in responding to it? One of the responses in Europe, for example, has been the introduction of quotas. One may very well support such measures because they seem to be the only possible way to maintain a national base for film, television and music production. But one should not hold any illusions about the effectiveness of such policies. One of the results of the quota system on radio, for instance, is to move national music to the hours after midnight so that national quotas can be fulfilled, while the demand for American popular music such as rap or rock music can be satisfied during the day. It is this demand, this striking attractiveness of American popular culture, which needs to be explained.

As a rule, explanations of the world-wide triumph of American popular culture are based on theories of manipulation or on theories of cultural imperialism. While theories of manipulation have been criticized even on the Left and have lost influence with the demise of orthodox Marxism, the "cultural imperialism"-paradigm, in which the popularity of American popular culture is attributed to the power and clever marketing strategies of American companies and, increasingly, of multinational corporations, has by now become the dominant model of explanation.[2] However, even for sympathetic commentators this position has some serious shortcomings. John Thompson, for example, draws attention to Katz's and Liebes's study of the very different ways in which the American television series *Dallas* was viewed by various ethnic groups in Israel and arrives at the conclusion:

> Studies such as this have shown convincingly that the reception and appropriation of media products are complex social processes in which individuals – interacting with

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2   Examples are provided by A. Dorfman and A. Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic;* Herbert Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire;* Ralph Willett, *The Americanization of Germany, 1945-1949;* Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonisation und Kalter Krieg;* Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. Mc World.* A more differentiated approach is taken by Richard F. Kuisel, *Seducing the French. The Dilemma of Americanization*, and Kaspar Maase, *BRAVO Amerika. Erkundungen zur Jugendkultur der Bundesrepublik in den fünfziger Jahren.* As Maase points out, "Americanization" had entirely unforeseen but welcome political consequences for post-World War II Germany by undermining authoritarian structures and, more specifically, the Prussian ideal of the "military man" much more effectively than official re-education efforts.

others as well as with the characters portrayed in the programmes they receive – actively make sense of messages, adopt various attitudes towards them and use them in differing ways in the course of their day-to-day lives. It is simply not possible to infer the varied features of reception processes from the characteristics of media messages considered by themselves, or from the commercial constraints operating on the producers of TV programmes. … This line of criticism presses to the heart of the cultural imperialism thesis. It shows that this thesis is unsatisfactory not only because it is outdated and empirically doubtful, but also because it is based on a conception of cultural phenomena which is fundamentally flawed. It fails to take account of the fact that the reception and appropriation of cultural phenomena are fundamentally hermeneutical processes in which individuals draw on the material and symbolic resources available to them, as well as on the interpretative assistance offered by those with whom they interact in their day-to-day lives, in order to make sense of the messages they receive and to find some way of relating to them (Thompson 172).

In his excellent discussion of existing theories of cultural imperialism, John Tomlinson makes a similar point: "The general message of empirical studies – informal ones like Ang's and more large-scale formal projects like Katz's and Liebes's – is that audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and 'invasion' than many critical media theorists have assumed" (49f.).[3] The growing control of the media market by American and, increasingly, multinational corporations cannot be denied and it is, for a number of reasons, a matter of great concern. Yet, in and by itself, it cannot provide a sufficient explanation of the Americanization of modern culture, because it has little or nothing to say about the social, psychological, emotional, and aesthetic uses of the cultural material which is disseminated by these corporations. Even if American companies dominate the market, there must be a reason why their products have such powerful appeal. As long as this question is not addressed, discussions of the Americanization process will remain superficial exercises in parading one's own "critical" consciousness.

II. Changing the Perspective

Could it actually be that the success of American popular culture has something to do with the product itself? There are two historical reasons why American society developed forms of popular culture over the years that were different in nature from those in other countries and were often experienced as especially vital or "modern." 1.) Because the entertainment industry provided ethnic groups with one of the few, and one of the major, possibilities

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3   Because *Dallas* was long considered the epitome of American cultural imperialism, it spawned a series of studies which, ironically enough, have helped to undermine some of the central assumptions on which the theory of cultural imperialism is based. Surveys of the current state of the debate are provided in the essay collections by Ellen Seiter et al., *Remote Control* and Hans Borchers et al., *Never-Ending Stories*.

for economic success and social rise, American popular culture profited from a variety of multi-ethnic influences that one does not find at work with equal force in other countries. In particular, the influence of African-American culture was unique and enormous. The result, most noticeably in the realm of popular music, was a hybrid mix of European and African traditions that was highly original and something no other country had to offer. 2.) Because of the multi-ethnic and the multicultural composition of its audiences especially in the crucial years of the break-through of the entertainment industry, American popular culture encountered a market early on that anticipated today's global market in its diversity and multilinguistic nature. In response to this heterogeneity, the search for a common, "universal" language of communication started much earlier and with far greater competitive pressure than in Europe.[4] One of the results was the emergence of a culture of performance and the spectacle that looked decidedly modern in comparison with 19th-century Victorian culture.[5] Both of these elements – the extraordinary richness of different cultural resources and the pressing need to find a common language that could bridge ethnic differences – gave American popular culture a head-start in international competition.

However, the Americanization of modern culture did not begin with these exports. Before an Americanization of other cultures could set in, it first had to take place in American society itself. Or, to put it differently: The process of cultural transformation, for which the term Americanization is used today, does not start with American cultural exports after World War II. It starts with the emergence of a new urban entertainment culture around the turn of the century. Its first "casualty" is therefore American culture itself, at least in the form of 19th century American Victorianism. This development was driven by the search for cultural forms that would be able to transcend separate national and ethnic traditions and would constitute a "universal" code of communication.[6] In this search, linguistic communication had obvious

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4   The point Ruth Vasey makes about Hollywood movies can therefore be extended to the American entertainment industry as a whole: "Ironically, therefore, the ethnic heterogeneity of Hollywood's audience, both at home and abroad, encouraged the increasing homogeneity of the screen's cast of characters …" (624).

5   For a more detailed description of the concept of a culture of performance, cf. my essay "Emergence or Collapse of Cultural Hierarchy? American Popular Culture Seen From Abroad." In his essay "Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture," Philip Fisher draws attention to the crucial role performative aspects play not only in American popular culture but also in American high culture. In "Veiled Ladies. Toward a History of Antebellum Entertainment," Richard Brodhead discusses some of the cultural changes that led to an increasing interest in spectacle in the middle class and points to the retreat into privacy as one of the major sources because the cult of privacy creates a need for looking at others from a safe distance.

6   "Universal" does not refer here to myths of international understanding or to the ideal of anthropological essences. It is used as a technical term to describe the goal of

limits. Images and music, on the other hand, had obvious advantages. And while the image still requires a certain "literacy" in the sense of being able to master a visual code, music can reduce such potential barriers even further. Thus, film and television, but above all popular music, have been the driving forces in the Americanization of modern culture.

This development can also be seen as part of an ongoing process of cultural dehierarchization in Western societies which begins with the arrival of modernity. Until the 18th century, apart from folk culture, several conditions had to be met in order to be able to take part in cultural life. Socially, one had to be in a position to be admitted to a cultural event, for example, to a concert at court or to the art exhibit of an aristocratic collector or a rich burgher. Financially, one had to have the means to be able to afford culture. Books were expensive, until several technological breakthroughs in printing made first forms of mass-production possible in the 18th century. Before these inventions, books remained an upper-class item, with the exception of religious literature. The great libraries of the 18th century were those of the church and the gentry and it was only with the introduction of the circulation library that common people gained the chance of having regular access to books. Finally, in order to make sense of culture and to be able to appreciate it, a relatively high degree of knowledge and education was needed. Reading was wide-spread in Protestant countries, but even there it was not an automatic skill. Moreover, for most of the existing literature, being able to read was not enough. As a rule, one needed not only a knowledge of Latin or Greek, but also knowledge of Greek mythology and Roman history. Similarly, to make sense of a painting, knowledge of classical iconography was indispensable.

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creating a language (in the sense of sign system) that can be understood by as many people as possible. This search for a common language should not be confused with the "lowest common denominator" of critical media theory. To give but one example: A director like D.W. Griffith tried to develop a filmic language that would be suited to tell a story effectively and with universal appeal. But Griffith developed that language with the goal of elevating film to an art form (and could thus influence a director like Eisenstein, for example). On the other hand, as John Cawelti has pointed out, even narrative "formulas" can provide a point of departure for complex processes of signification. See Cawelti's seminal study *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Popular Art and Popular Culture* and the important essay "Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture." On the issue of standardization, see also Richard Shusterman: "Standardization can be found in high as well as popular art. Both employ conventions or formulae to facilitate communication, to achieve certain aesthetic forms and effects whose value has been proven, and to provide a solid basis from which to develop creative elaborations and innovations. The sonnet's length is just as rigidly standard as the TV sitcom's, and neither limit precludes creativity. What determines the aesthetic validity of formulae, conventions, and generic standards is whether they are imaginatively deployed" (117).

Basically, the term popular culture refers to cultural forms that undermine and abolish these conditions of access.[7] In order to provide the discussion of the Americanization of modern culture with a historical dimension, the following essay will describe some of the essential stages of this ever-intensifying and accelerating process. In this history of cultural dehierarchization, my focus will not be on matters of content, because before and beyond this dimension, cultural history is more decisively shaped by questions of access, cultural competence and the aesthetic experience opened up by a particular medium or cultural form. In order to capture the complex interaction of these factors, I shall use five points of reference throughout this essay: 1.) the impact of technological innovations on cultural developments; 2.) conditions of social access; 3.) the cultural competence or "literacy" needed for understanding and appreciating a text or an object; 4.) expressive potential, that is, the usefulness of a cultural form for the purpose of self-presentation and self-fashioning; 5.) finally, the possibilities opened up by particular media or cultural forms for the articulation and representation of the imaginary. The concept of the imaginary is used here to describe the unstructured and decontextualized stream of images, associations, sensations and feelings that constantly feed our cognition and interpretation of the world without having a tangible form of their own.[8] Because these diffuse images and sensations do not have a gestalt of their own, they must strive for representation. Fiction and other cultural material such as spectacles and performances are ideally suited for this goal, because they communicate by means of symbols which can fuse meaning and emotion and because they have the freedom to make up a world that is not identical with any given reality. Since human beings, for a number of reasons, want to give their inner world some form of articulation and representation, they will seek out those cultural forms which are especially useful for this purpose. In fact, one may claim that the search for ever more powerful and direct forms of articulation of the imaginary is one of the driving forces in the cultural history of the West.[9]

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7   This has remained the major difficulty in definitions of the term popular culture because "popular culture" is not a systematic category but a historical one. It only makes sense in relation to a specific historical context and its cultural hierarchies. This is the reason why I find the term popular culture preferable to that of mass culture. Popular culture is a term of cultural history, mass culture refers to a mode of cultural production.

8   In the context of this essay, the concept of the imaginary is thus not used in a psychoanalytical sense, that is, as the source for an illusion of wholeness. Rather, it is used in a phenomenological sense and describes a stream of diffuse associations and sensations which strive for representation.

9   This drive for articulation and representation can never be fully satisfied, however, because each representation is also a socialization of the anarchic, chaotic world of the imaginary and hence a reduction. The ensuing non-identity between the imaginary and its representation can be seen as one of the reasons why the imaginary never ceases to rekindle and refuel a desire for articulation. For a more detailed discussion

III. The Novel as the First Mass Medium

Technological developments, social access, cultural literacy, expressive self-fashioning, and articulation of the imaginary: The way in which these five aspects interact and reinforce each other in cultural history can be illustrated by the first mass medium in Western societies, the novel, and more specifically, its most popular form, the sentimental novel.[10] The creation of the novel would have been unthinkable without the introduction of new printing presses which had several cultural consequences. By making possible the mass production of printed material and by creating a market for the middle and lower middle classes, these new printing presses undermined the up to then privileged access to books. As soon as mass production became possible, social access for new groups increased. As a result, the level of cultural literacy could be lowered. The sentimental novel, for example, created a new kind of audience, consisting mostly of young and female readers. This audience was addressed in an unelaborate, almost journalistic form of plain language for which no classical education was needed. In a way, the novel was an "epic" for readers without classical education. It provided a form of cultural expression for an entirely new group of readers.

The social and cultural empowerment which the novel brought about was made possible by the transition from oral culture to print culture. Usually, in following the lead of Walter Benjamin, this transition is seen as a loss, in fact, as supreme example of the dissolution of communality by the modernization process. However, for the individual, the institutionalization of a print culture resulted in a remarkable gain in individual control. The important aspect to consider here is that one can be "alone" with a book, even in a primarily public space as the drawing-room, simply by concentrating on the reading material itself, or by withdrawing to a corner of the room. Better still, a book can be carried to one's own room and read at all times of the day or night. In all of these contexts, literature can be used in entirely new ways: One can determine the pace of reading, slow down, speed up, and read certain pages or passages again and again. One can jump ahead or go back again. Or one can stop altogether and spin out the plot in daydream-fashion at one's own

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of the relation between the imaginary and fiction, see the first chapter of my study *Das kulturelle Imaginäre.*

10 As Jim Cullen reminds us in *The Art of Democracy. A Concise History of Popular Culture in the United States,* it only took a century to transform the novel from a despised mass medium to one of the most respected literary forms of the Western world. Already in 1958, Raymond Williams had written in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*: "Then, the decisive date was between 1730 and 1740, and what had emerged, with the advance of the middle classes to prosperity, was a new middle-class reading public. The immediate result was that vulgar phenomenon, the novel. … [N]ow that the bad novels are all out of print, and the good ones are among our classics, we see that the novel itself … cannot be lightly dismissed as vulgar" (306).

will. And one can repeat the experience as often as one likes.

The transition from an oral culture to a print culture also increases individual control over the selection of cultural material. As long as culture is defined by tradition and transmitted orally, individual choice remains limited. As in church, where the churchgoer has to listen to the same biblical stories time and again, a small number of narratives is circulated continuously. Now, the individual can select material that comes more closely to her own imaginary longings and emotional needs.[11] Even more importantly, the abstract quality of print stimulates the mental and emotional processing of this material in new ways. Because the words on the page have to be translated into images and because characters and events are increasingly individualized, a space of individual interpretation is opened up. This, in fact, was one of the points that irritated the gentry about the sentimental novel and caused shrill warnings about the dangers of reading it which bear striking resemblance to the attacks on comics, television, and Rock and Roll in the 1950s.[12] The sentimental novel's focus on the theme of seduction and its keyhole-perspective unashamedly drew on the imaginary of its readers by suggesting "unnameable" acts which the reader was invited to actualize in her own imagination.[13] In this sense, the reader herself became an author of the story.

In all of these aspects, the sentimental novel gave "power" to a new class of readers. It turned young girls into potential "heroines" and gave sensitive young readers a sense of heightened importance by putting their world and emotions at the center of a "grand" drama. It gave articulation to imaginary elements that could not be expressed otherwise without a loss of respectability.

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[11] This is not to say that these longings and needs are not socially shaped and culturally constructed. What increases is not individual "freedom" per se, but the range of choices available for the articulation of these socially constituted needs.

[12] The sentimental novel is not yet a specifically "American" genre but a cultural import from England. (Soon after the English publication of Richardson's *Pamela*, a printer named Benjamin Franklin brought out an edition in the American colonies.) *Pamela* and *Clarissa* were very popular in the colonies, as were Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. When the new American Republic finally produced its own versions of the genre, most notably *The Power of Sympathy* (published anonymously in 1789), Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), the genre was already somewhat dated and was soon replaced by the novel of manners and, above all, the historical novel. But the sentimental novel bore the brunt of the attacks on the new medium of the novel and thus paved the way for the emergence of modern popular culture in the United States.

[13] The deeply ambiguous nature of the Richardsonian tale of seduction is described by Ian Watt in his seminal study *The Rise of the Novel*: "But if the latent ambiguities of the sexual code helped Richardson to produce the first true novel, they at the same time conspired to create something that was new and prophetic in quite another sense: a work that could be praised from the pulpit and yet attacked as pornography, a work that gratified the reading public with the combined attractions of a sermon and a striptease" (172f.). Even in "teaching a lesson," the novel constantly stimulates the reader to imagine that against which it warns the reader.

And it allowed for a mode of reception that enabled the reader to exert individual control over the mental processing of these elements and make use of them in ways that met her own wishes and emotional needs. The social empowerment and imaginary self-empowerment brought about by the rise of the novel is expressed in a nutshell in the following quote from the beginning of an early American novel of the period around 1800:

> Avail yourself of the moment that offers
> to indulge in the perusal of this book.
> Take it, read it, there is nothing to fear.
> Your Governess is gone out, and your Mamma is not yet risen. (Orians 213)[14]

The passage comprises in exemplary fashion all elements of the cultural de-hierarchization initiated by the novel: It emphasizes the new possibility of private use ("Avail yourself of the moment …") as a condition for increased control ("take it, read it …") and self-assertion ("there is nothing to fear"). The heroine can take advantage of a temporary breakdown of guardianship ("Your Governess is gone out, and your Mamma is not yet risen") in order to spend time with another, much more attractive "companion" without having to fear immediate consequences of her individual transgression. Instead, the temporary liberation from the dictates of guardianship opens up a precious moment of imaginary indulgence ("to indulge in the perusal of this book").

IV. The Shift to Formula Literature

One explanation for the irritated reaction of the cultural elite to the sentimental novel may be seen in the fact that, in talking about the easily misguided reader (who, in the worst of cases, will be led to self-destruction), the gentry was also talking about its own children. Although reading a sentimental novel does no longer require a classical education or a knowledge of classical poetics, it still requires a considerable degree of cultural literacy. Already, the length of many sentimental novels narrows down the range of potential readers. These readers must also be able to understand and evaluate a number of complex psychological issues, especially where the inner life of the heroine stands at the center of the novel, as it does in the epistolary novels of Richardson and many of his successors. However, during the course of the 19th century this barrier of access is overcome by a growing differentiation of the novel. As a result, the once despised literary "bastard" develops into entirely different, in fact opposite, directions: an "art" novel with growing aesthetic ambitions which also requires increased literary competence on the side of the reader, and a mass literature centered around recurring plot formulas which derives a good deal of its effectiveness and popular suc-

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14   The source is the novel *Wanderings of William* by John Davis.

cess from a radical reduction of plot, setting, and character.[15] Of these, the elimination of the psychological dimension of characterization is perhaps the most important.[16] In terms of cultural literacy, this shift to formula literature leads to another reduction in the knowledge and education needed to make sense of cultural material. In the dime novels of the second half of the 19th century this lowering of the cultural barrier of access finds its equivalent in a decrease in prices, that is, in the lowering of social and financial barriers of access.[17] Both reductions, that in price and that in required cultural literacy, create a literature for "uneducated" young adolescents, many of them from farms or immigrant families, who begin to have an age- and gender-specific culture of their own.[18]

It would be insufficient, however, to explain the amazing success-story of the dime novel simply by its standardization of plot and its lowering of the intellectual demands made on the reader. For clearly, the standardization of narrative elements (which is not yet characteristic of the sentimental novel in its classical version) and the reduction of the psychological dimension of characterization, serve another purpose than that of a mere simplification for its own sake: They shift the sources of meaning and value from the level of a rich inner life to that of performance: The typical action heroes of dime novels are not very articulate and possess hardly any psychological depth. They derive their self-esteem and sense of importance from qualities such as bodily strength, physical skills, cunning self-defense and a readiness for action. Their true worth is thus no longer "hidden," as is often the case in the sentimental novel. On the contrary, it is eminently presentable and is proudly exhibited in performance. Social recognition is thus based on skills that are within reach of the young male reader.

In their emphasis on action and performance, dime novels open up new possibilities of imaginary self-empowerment. This self-empowerment gets

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15 As Lawrence Levine has shown in his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America,* this growing dichotomy between high culture and popular culture is not restricted to the realm of literature but comprises music, painting, and the theater as well. Without this separation of cultural levels, 20th century modernism would not have been possible.

16 This reduction of characterization takes place at the same time at which a new literary movement, realism, propagates an "eventless" novel, reduced in plot and ideally without happy ending, which focusses primarily on matters of social interaction and emphasizes detailed psychological characterization.

17 In his essay "Literature for the Populace," Jack Salzman therefore describes the dime novel as the first and most influential manifestation of a democratic culture in the United States: "Movies may have been the first true form of mass amusement in the United States, but the dime novel was the first and most influential of the democratic art forms to be produced in this country" (554).

18 For a more detailed description of the social background and function of the mass literature of the period see my discussion of the Horatio Alger-novels in *Populäre Kultur.*

additional nourishment from a social rehierarchization on the level of content: Since the heroes of the dime novel function as (often last) guarantors of social order and justice, social hierarchies are rearranged on the basis of qualities that favor the young male reader's self-perception. This explains the role the dime novel played in the perpetuation of the American myth of a regeneration through violence. As a supreme token of the hero's ability to assert himself, violence does not only function as a means of establishing justice in a lawless world. It also becomes a form of self-expression for the otherwise taciturn, inarticulate hero through which he speaks and demonstrates his true worth. This, in turn, creates new, "short-circuited" forms of reception: Because its characters possess no psychological depth, the dime novel invites a form of reception in which the imaginary can tie itself to "strong" forms of articulation without having to undergo complex processes of mental and moral mediation.[19] Psychology in characterization requires complex activities of understanding, the performance of violence in action evades conceptual mediation and "convinces" in and by itself.

V. Performance and Spectacle:
American Entertainment Culture

In its shift from psychology to performance the dime novel is one of the "missing links" between the novel of the 18th and 19th century and the emergence of an American entertainment industry around the turn of the century with which modern popular culture began to come into its own and to provide a widely popular "counter-culture" to Victorian ideals of character-formation. This new popular culture indulges in performance and spectacle for their own sake. It has no longer any didactic or representational goals.[20] It draws its le-

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19 In this sense, dime novels present the final subversion of the novel of education and its ideal of a character development based on psychological insight and self-awareness. In his entry on *Pulps* in Thomas Inge's *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture,* Bill Blackbeard calls the dime novels and the following "nickel thrillers" "fiction of minimal literacy" (292).

20 This is not to imply that the new entertainment culture is dissociated from society' values. On this point, see the reminder by Erik Barnouw and Catherine Kirkland in their entry on entertainment in Richard Bauman's handbook *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*: "When a film or television program is classified as entertainment, the label implies that it is intended primarily to absorb the attention and to leave agreeable feelings. Any weightier roles of communication, such as education or persuasion, are assumed to take a back seat, in contrast to other types of content such as news, political communication, or advertising ... This assumption is embedded in such phrases as 'mere entertainment' and 'pure entertainment' and in the idea of entertainment as an escape from reality. Yet the study of media messages and their effects has made clear that despite – and perhaps because of – the innocuous associations of the label, entertainment plays a significant role in the cultivation of

gitimation exclusively from the promise of being a "show," as McLean points out in his characterization of what was perhaps the quintessential form of this new culture of performance, the vaudeville show: "In this ritual, cause-and-effect relationships were completely bypassed, the question of ultimate ends was never raised, and the problem of higher values could be submerged in waves of pathos and humor. Not the happy ending but the happy moment, not fulfillment at the end of some career rainbow but a sensory, psychically satisfying here-and-now were the results of the vaudeville show" (11).[21] This culture of performance is satisfied to demonstrate or exhibit special acrobatic skills, extraordinary musical or histrionic talents, bodily attractions, or technological "sensations."[22] Its major forms and manifestations are vaudeville, the amusement park, the dance craze and the dance hall, the burlesque show, the comics pages, advertising, the professionalization of sports and the silent movies.[23] In each case, although to varying degrees, exhibition and performance become the actual cultural event and the major source of meaning.[24]

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values and beliefs and the socialization of children. Entertainment's impact is embedded in premises that are not debated and may not even be clearly articulated but are accepted by audiences in order for the experience to have meaning. Its influence is pervasive and cumulative. In effect, entertainment in all its forms constitutes a storytelling environment that operates by principles at once implicit and widely shared to help form expectations and interpretations of the social world" (51).

21 Vaudeville absorbed forms such as the minstrel-show, burlesque theater, the English Music Hall tradition, and the concert saloon of lower-class life which it "sanitized" for a middle-class audience.

22 Thus, the word performance is used here to describe a display for its own sake which draws attention to the intrinsic qualities of an object or act of communication. As an "aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication," performance is for Richard Bauman "… formally reflexive – signification about signification – insofar as it calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system (physical movement in dance, language and tone in song, and so on), making one at least conscious of its devices" (47f.). Seen this way, performance is also "an especially potent and heightened means of taking the role of the other …" (47f.). The spectacle as it is understood here is part of the culture of performance. The word is not used to describe a public event but the "mere" display of a person or a thing which evokes responses of admiration, wonder, or at least curiosity.

23 Important aspects of this development are described by John Kasson, *Amusing the Million. Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out. New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*; Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City. Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film* and by various essays in the book *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life,* edited by Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz.

24 The spectacle is already a prominent feature of American cultural life in the 19th century, for example in forms as the stage melodrama, the minstrel-show, the dime museum, the medicine show, the world fair, the circus and "Buffalo Bill's Wild West," the

The emergence of this new entertainment culture can be seen as a watershed in cultural history because it marks the final transition from the dominance of a print culture to a visual culture ushered in by a whole new array of technological developments in film material and film processing, film cameras, the phonograph, amusement park technology, color printing and so on.[25]

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immensely popular show created by William Cody in 1893. The difference between these older forms and the new urban forms lie essentially in the serialization and modernization of the spectacle. Circuses and Cody's Wild West Shows were traveling companies which were not, or not exclusively, located in any particular place. Thus, their shows still remained extraordinary events. Moreover, spectacles like the world fairs or Buffalo Bill's "Wild West" had a didactic purpose and still reacted vehemently against the impression of being "nothing but a show," as, for example, in the following advertisement for "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" in 1898: "It is not a 'show' in any sense of the word, but it is a series of original, genuine and instructive object lessons in which the participants repeat the heroic parts they have played in actual life upon the plains, in the wilderness, mountain vastness and in the dread and dangerous scenes of savage and cruel warfare" (quoted after Slotkin 175). The contrast is provided by vaudeville as the paradigmatic form of the new urban culture of performance. Its most important forerunner in the 19th century is the minstrel-show in which performance and spectacle for their own sake were made possible by masquerade. Cf. Don Wilmeth's entry on stage entertainments in Inge's *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*: "Minstrelsy was the first major stage entertainment to avoid the elitist reputation of legitimate drama and commit itself to the new commonman audience. It was immediate, unpretentious, and devoted to fun ..." (382).

25 In order to describe the special contribution of the silent film to the new culture of performance and exhibition, Tom Gunning has introduced the useful term of a "cinema of attractions." The concept draws attention to the fact that, in their initial stage, silent movies gave priority to the extraordinary spectacle or the spectacular technological effect over narrative continuity and plausibility. Cf. Miriam Hansen's helpful summary of Gunning's argument: "Aiming at the specificity of early film-viewer relations, Tom Gunning has coined the by now familiar phrase *cinema of attractions,* which plays on the Eisensteinian sense of *attraction* as well as its more colloquial usage in the context of fairgrounds, circuses, variety shows, dime museums, and other commercial entertainment venues that had also inspired Eisenstein's use of the term. Early cinema inherited from those venues a diversity of genres and topics such as boxing matches, scenes from the wild west and passion plays, travelogues in the manner of the stereopticon lectures, trick films in the tradition of magic shows, sight gags and comic skits from the burlesque or vaudeville stage, pornographic flicks in the peepshow vein, and highlights from popular plays and operas. With this tradition, early films adopted a particular aesthetics of display, of showmanship, defined by the goal of assaulting viewers with sensational, supernatural, scientific, sentimental, or otherwise stimulating sights, as opposed to enveloping them into the illusion of a fictional narrative. The style of early films was presentational rather than representational; that is, they tended to address the viewer directly – as in frequent asides to the camera and the predominantly frontal organization of space – rather than indirectly – as classical films do through perceptual absorption into a closed diegetic space" (137). This "spectacular" dimension continues a mode established by vaudeville: "The touchstone in this vaudeville war was 'novelty': which theater could outdo all the others in presenting the

These technological developments redefine cultural literacy. The act of seeing replaces the act of reading. Cultural barriers of access are lowered again. Even for the reading of a Western dime novel one needs basic reading skills and a decent command of the English language. For the song-and-dance routines of vaudeville, the delights of the amusement park, or the watching of a silent movie one need no longer be able to read. In reducing the cultural literacy required to make sense of a written text, the sentimental novel and the dime novel, each in its own way, successfully "empowered" readers such as the young girl or the male adolescent. The new culture of performance goes one step further. In its reliance on visual and performative elements it is accessible to the waves of new immigrants coming to the United States in the period between 1890 and 1920, mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe. These immigrants encountered severe language barriers which were not easily overcome, while, on the other hand, performance and spectacle functioned as powerful means of acculturation.[26] And while the vaudeville show, because of its need to pay life performers, still requires an entrance fee that is not exactly low, the new technological possibilities of filmic reproduction lead to such cheap admission prices that "going to the movies" becomes affordable to (almost) all social groups and one and the same film can be seen twice, thrice or as often as one wants.[27]

In widening the possibilities of social access, the new culture of performance changed the social composition of the audience and worked against exclusion and segregation. In the unruly chaos of the amusement park or the darkness of the cinema, social classes and groups began to mingle in unforeseen ways. This was especially true for the relation between the sexes because the new entertainment culture opened up new public spaces for women. While respectable women could not go out without a chaperon before

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most 'spectacular,' 'unusual,' 'expensive' acts" (Allen, "Movies" 64).

26 By acculturation I do not mean here the goal of successful social and political integration (for example, in the sense of the Americanization-movement of the period), but an introduction into consumer society and its values. In his essay "Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," Russell Merritt emphasizes this aspect of the acculturation process: "Later historians would claim that such films worked as part of the immigrant's acculturation to American society, entertaining guides to the values and customs of the new world. But, in fact, few movies of this period performed such a task … Rather, the films were offered as spectacles that induced the onlooker to marvel at the unnatural, whether in the form of a slapstick chase, a comic dream, a wondrous adventure, or a historic disaster" (88f.). Merritt provides a fine example for the liberation of scenes from their original religious or moral contexts in order to focus on them as spectacle: "In Louis B. Mayer's Orpheum, Pathé's *Passion Play,* 'the life of Christ from the Annunciation to the Ascension in twenty-seven beautiful scenes,' was followed the next week by *Bluebeard, the Man with Many Wives.* Both were successful" (97).

27 The admission price for the "Nickel-Odeon," the theater for a nickel, was 5 to 10 cents, for Vaudeville it ranged from 25 cents to $ 1.50.

1890, they could now go to dance halls, dance teas, or to the cinema.[28] All three offered new possibilities for a public encounter between the sexes, as did the amusement park. In the roller coaster-rides of the amusement park which draw their thrill from a temporary loss of control, "scandalous" bodily contacts became possible, while in the dance craze after 1914 this contact (between the sexes and between the classes) was intensified. Where both coincided, as in the phenomenon of the "tango pirate," such breaking down of social barriers caused alarm and social panic.[29]

As was already apparent in the case of the dime novel, performance and spectacle also create new sources of self-esteem and new hierarchies of cultural importance. In the wake of the emerging culture of performance, new cultural heroes were created. The actress, the boxer, the show girl, the film star or the dancer became the widely admired and celebrated representatives of a cultural style of forceful self-expression and uninhibited self-presentation.[30] In many instances, such as that of the revue girl, no special talent or skill was needed to gain visibility. To present oneself was sufficient. This dehierarchization also manifests itself on the level of content: In the comic routines of vaudeville and the slapstick comedies of the silent movies authorities are challenged and continuously ridiculed; in the carefree, "irresponsible" world of the amusement park or the animal-mimicry of the dance craze, "childish" behavior becomes a popular model of cultural self-expression.

VI. The Movies

Let us stay with the movies for a moment, because as far as the possibilities for an articulation of the imaginary are concerned, film is the most important

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28 As Kathy Peiss has shown in her book *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, young working-class women, who often went out together with a friend, led the way in this development. Afternoon dance teas were attended by young upper-class women, cinemas in shopping districts also by middle-class women.

29 Almost all of the stages of cultural dehierarchization discussed in this essay provoked harsh criticism from social and cultural elites and often led to melodramatic visions of social or cultural collapse.

30 In his history of the development of burlesque theater in the United States, Robert Allen provides a wonderful illustration of this emergence of self-presentation for its own sake: "Some of the most vituperative commentary on burlesque came from Olive Logan, herself an actress and campaigner for women's rights. The 'nudity' of the ballet corps of *The Black Crook* could be tolerated, she wrote, because the dancers mutely represented imps and demons. The burlesque performer's 'nudity' was infinitely more transgressive to Logan because it was self-consciously spectacular rather than mimetic: 'The nude woman of today represents nothing but herself … the woman, that is, whose name is on the bills in large letters and who considers herself an object of admiration to the spectators'" (Allen, "Leg Business" 50).

of the new cultural forms and media. At first blush, moving pictures, in comparison with literature, seem to lead to a reduction in mental activities and the possibility of aesthetic experience. This, at least, is the conventional wisdom with which generations of students have grown up. However, the matter is not quite as simple. To be sure, the novel activates our imagination, but it also "deserts" it quite often. As a rule, the images with which we come up in order to give shape to the words on the page do not become very concrete and often remain vague.[31] In reading a novel like Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, we gradually build up an image of its heroine Isabel Archer that is, however, never very stable for several reasons. Since the novel has to rely on words and thus cannot fully represent Isabel, the reader has to supply her own ideas and images on what Isabel looks like. However, the Isabel imagined in this way is a hypothetical one which has to be constantly revised and reimagined anew as the novel goes along – especially since Isabel ages and develops as a person. This gap between verbal representation and mental image may stimulate the reader's mental activities but it also leads to constant breakdowns in the process of imagining and visualizing a literary character. Film is more concrete and thus "reduced," but as a form of immediate experience it is also more effective in activating our feelings and desires, because these can be attached to an image that retains a stable appearance and can therefore function as reliable reference. In terms of popular appeal, film has therefore easily replaced literature.

The history of American film can be seen as a constant attempt to maximize the potential of film to create an intense "immediate experience."[32] Silent movies already have an advantage over vaudeville because of the

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31 To give but one example. In her sentimental novel *Charlotte Temple,* Susanna Rowson introduces the heroine (and focus of identification) in the following manner: "A tall, elegant girl looked at Montraville and blushed; he instantly recollected the features of Charlotte Temple …" (3). And one page later: "'Did you notice her?' continued Montraville: 'she had on a blue bonnet, and with a pair of lovely eyes of the same color, has contrived to make me devilish odd about the heart'" (4). Such descriptions leave a lot of room for the imagination. They serve as a rough sketch which the reader has to fill out herself. But even where the description is more detailed, as in the following example taken from the sequel *Lucy Temple,* it is hard to actually "picture" the heroine: "We have already announced Lucy Blakeney, and if what has been said, does not give a competent idea of her character, we must leave it to time to develop; as to her person, it was of the middle size, perfectly well proportioned, and her figure and limbs had that roundedness, which, in the eye of an artist, constitutes beauty. Her complexion was rather fair than dark, her eyes open, large, full hazel, her hair light brown, and her face animated with the glow of health and the smile of good humour" (143). Because there are so many aspects to process mentally that would have to be kept in mind simultaneously, it is unlikely that the reader is able to actually create a mental picture of Lucy. Rather, the characteristics Rowson lists serve as a catalogue of positive reference words which determine the reader's attitude toward the heroine.

32 The term was coined by Robert Warshow in his pioneering essay collection *The Immediate Experience* in order to describe the power of American popular culture.

close-range and power of their images which can be intensified, as for example in the films of D.W. Griffith, by devices such as close-ups or crosscutting. However, silent movies still struggle with a number of handicaps. For once, the filmic illusion is constantly interrupted by subtitles which are needed to establish causal links between different scenes. It is also undermined by the often awkward transitions between scenes and the technically inept editing. In addition, the theatrical mode of signification, ranging from the immobility of the camera to overly melodramatic acting styles, distances the spectator who is still cast in the role of a theater-goer and not in that of a hidden onlooker.[33] With the arrival of sound and an ongoing professionalization of film making that already sets in in the 1920s, the possibilities for the creation of a full filmic illusion are constantly improved. As cinematic apparatus theory and feminist film scholars such as Laura Mulvey have shown, the basic difference between silent film and classical Hollywood film, the so-called classical Hollywood system, can be seen in the increasing effectiveness of film in activating processes of identification by continuity editing, the placement of characters in the frame, American shots and eye-line matches.[34] All of these devices raise the filmic reality-effect to the level of an uninterrupted, fully absorbing illusion that activates and facilitates strong emotional involvement on the side of the spectator. The classical Hollywood system does not distance the imaginary but absorbs and focuses it powerfully. The typical way of watching a movie increases this effect. For in contrast to the theater, film is no longer a communal form. Once the lights go out, we are sitting alone in the dark, regressing to a passive, almost immobile state, and entirely dependent on the imagination to do all the work for us. Clearly, this situation is ideally suited to maximize the stimulation of the imaginary.[35]

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33 On this point, cf. Kristin Thompson: "As many historians have noted, the primitive cinema largely assumed that the spectator was equivalent to an audience member in a theater. Mise-en-scene often imitated theatrical settings, and actors behaved as if they were on an actual stage. The framing and staging of scenes in constructed sets placed the spectator at a distance from the space of the action, looking into it … The classical cinema, on the other hand, assumes that the narration places a spectator within or on the edge of the narrative space" (Bordwell 158). This difference in positioning the spectator finds its equivalent in the different forms of film exhibition. Silent movies were initially often part of vaudeville performances and thus part of a public theatrical setting.

34 The classical texts of this body of film criticism are Jean-Louis Baudry's essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," Christian Metz's book *The Imaginary Signifier*, and Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." All three differ in the description of the ideological effect achieved by the classical Hollywood system, but provide important descriptions of the filmic construction of a full filmic illusion which creates a fictive sense of omnipresence and omnipotence in the spectator.

35 Silence is an important part of that strategy to intensify the spectator's involvement. It should therefore not be seen simply as an instrument of the middle-class to establish

VII. Radio and Popular Music.
Overcoming Spatial and Racial Distances

In the history of cultural dehierarchization traced here, the invention of the radio presents another breakthrough moment because it opened up a new chapter in the story of social accessibility. When the radio entered American culture in the 1920s (and for a long period thereafter), one still had to go to a movie-theater in order to see a movie. For listening to the radio, on the other hand, it was sufficient to turn a knob. The movie-theater lay outside of one's home. Often, one had to drive or use public transportation in order to get there. The radio was inside one's home and thus within easy reach. The listener was no longer dependent on the choices and time schedules of the movie-houses. He could make use of the radio at all times of the day or the night. He could even do so without getting dressed, while lying in bed or being sick. This is the basic advantage of the radio: The radio listener no longer has to go to the event. The event comes to him.

One of the major attractions of the new medium consisted in its ability to bridge spatial and temporal distances. Radio created the possibility of "participating" in events which took place at the same moment in locations that were geographically far removed. By listening to the life-broadcast of a sports event in New York while sitting in a farm-house in Iowa, the listener can leap over a spatial barrier that would make it impossible under normal circumstances to be present at the game.[36] By listening to a concert at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, while still sitting in that same farm-house in Iowa, the listener may overcome a social and cultural barrier that has so far prevented him from ever getting into contact with a certain cultural sphere.[37] Or, by listening to a Rhythm & Blues-station (as, in fact, many young whites did in the early 50s), the listener can hurdle the race barrier. This highlights a new dimension in cultural access: With the radio, the listener is able to sneak in on another culture without being seen and without running any personal risk of exposure.[38] A series of breakthroughs in transistor technology

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its cultural hegemony over a "rowdy," pleasantly anarchic form of communal culture, as it is interpreted, for example in Lawrence Levine's otherwise highly informative book *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Clearly, silence permits the spectator to concentrate more fully on the filmic performance and to experience it more intensely.

36 The broadcasting of sports events was one of the areas in which this effect of "being present" at a far-away event was especially striking. It therefore contributed greatly to the attractiveness of radio.

37 Other musical events which provided a precious sense of participation were the weekly broadcasts in which famous swing bands were featured. Obviously, for such events the family members still gathered around the radio receiver in the living room.

38 See the example provided by Barlow's and Finley's description of the rising popularity of gospel music in the postwar years: "Black appeal radio stations such as WDIA in Memphis, WLAC in Nashville, WERD in Atlanta, and WOOK in Washington, D.C., all broadcast a wide variety of gospel as part of their weekly programming. These

have steadily increased the possibilities of taking advantage of the medium. Originally, there was only one receiver in the living room around which the family gathered. Subsequently, radios got smaller and smaller, until they became portable, could be used in all rooms of the house, then in the car, and finally even while jogging in the streets. The options of individual use have thus grown tremendously.

Again, the new medium also redefines cultural literacy. Several aspects are of importance here. One is that, as a rule, radio is no longer a medium which absorbs the listener completely. The radio program comes to the listener without his effort. One does not "attend" a radio performance, and, as a consequence, one does not invest the same kind of concentration and exclusive focus on the program as one does in reading a book or watching a movie. This is the reason why radio can often function as companion for a whole range of other activities. Radio is therefore most effective with programs that do not require full concentration on the side of the listener and reach him at quasi semi-conscious levels. The ideal cultural form to achieve this is music which, especially in its popular forms, seems to speak "for itself" and does not require any decoding. Thus, popular music is the form through which radio came into its own and survived the threat of television. It was the development of popular music from swing to rock and on to present versions which made the radio indispensible. For this kind of music, however, one needs hardly any cultural literacy whatsoever. In its hypnotic rhythmic form, the music does all the work for you.

Music in its popular form of rock music (in the widest sense of the word) is also a form in which the imaginary finds entirely new means of articulation. In contrast to the spectator, the listener is no longer dependent on an image that resonates with him, because the main source of gratification lies in the direct experience of the music. This music may evoke brief images, but it does not depend on them for its effect. To have an impact on the listener, it does not require any mental mediation. The secrecy of its success lies in the fact that it expresses emotional states or bodily sensations without such a detour and conceptual "translation." Rather, if effective, popular music can create the impression that the body itself has found a direct, unmediated means of articulation. It is as if the imaginary is alone with itself without interference by the reality-principle. And with the arrival of the disc and especially the compact disc, the possibilities to evoke these moods again and again are increased dramatically.

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radio outlets introduced gospel music to a much broader cross section of the African American population, not to mention the curious white listeners who could also tune in to the shows" (96).

VIII. Contemporary Visual Culture:
Segmentation and Endless Supplementarity

A parallel development can be observed in visual culture with the arrival of television after World War II. Initially, the new medium was considered inferior on almost all accounts: It lacked the intellectual level of literature, the visual quality of film, and the high fidelity sound of music records. In the beginning, it was, in fact, hardly more than a bad radio with fuzzy pictures. However, something was also made possible by the new technology and this gain links the emergence of television to the story of cultural dehierarchization which we are tracing here. Because of its lack of visual quality, television has never managed to develop an aesthetics of its own. Instead it has become a box – and increasingly an archive – for the dissemination or the retrieval of a wide variety of programs, all of which have their own, very different potentials of gratification. This heterogenization of aesthetic experience has grown with each technological innovation. Remote control, video recorder, satellite disc, cable television and now digitilization have all multiplied the cultural material and types of programs that are accessible to the television viewer.

Inevitably, this decentered heterogeneity changes the viewer's characteristic mode of reception. On the one hand, the constant flow of images tends to undermine any strong emotional involvement. After a beer commercial we get the news and the weather, then a crime story, a talk show, more news and more weather, video clips and perhaps a late-night movie.[39] The illusionist absorption of the viewer of the classical cinema is giving way, to quote Miriam Hansen, "to ostensibly more self-regulated yet privatized, distracted acts of consumption" (Hansen, "Early Cinema" 135). An aesthetics of the glance is replacing an aesthetics of the gaze.[40] Narrative unity gives way to a continu-

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[39] Cf. Kaplan's fitting characterization: "All of these programs exist on a kind of horizontal axis that is never ending, instead of being discrete units consumed within the fixed two-hour limit of the Hollywood movie or, like the novel, having a fixed and clearly defined boundary. In a sense, TV has neither a clear boundary nor a fixed textual limit. Rather, the TV screen may be conceived of as a frame through which a never ending series of texts moves laterally …" (4). Fittingly, John Fiske speaks of "nomadic" subjectivity of the viewer (Fiske, "Moments of Television" 57).

[40] This distracted mode of screening is intensified by the fact that watching television is often combined with other activities. Cf. David Morley's helpful summary of recent studies of television use: "At the simplest level we already know, for example, that 'pure' television viewing is a relatively rare occupance. Thus Gunther and Svennevig (1987: 12-13) quote surveys showing variously 50 per cent to 64 percent of viewers as reporting that they usually watch television while doing something else at the same time. Equally, having the set on, or the presence of people in front of the set can mean, as Towler notes, 'a hundred different things' (Towler 1985). Taylor and Mullan (1985) quote a number of their respondents as reporting that they simply put the set on, when they come into the house, in exactly the same way that they might switch on the light. As Kubey (1986) notes, having the set on is, for many people, simply an index of

ous, potentially endless flow of images. In this segmentation of experience, "discontinuity, fragmentation and sudden, unforeseen clashes between discrepant segments take precedence over continuity, unity, and narrative coherence. Channel surfing, interruptions for advertisement, video taping and zapping intensify this segmentation" (Fiske, "Moments of Television" 63).[41]

On the other hand, this growing fragmentation can also provide the viewer with a new sense of freedom: "The segmentation of television allows for connections between its segments to be made according to the laws of association rather than those of consequence, logic, or cause and effect" (Fiske, "Moments of Television" 63). The experience of an unimpeded flow makes for a mode of reception that is less and less textually determined, and offers the viewer more scope to come up with his or her own connections between different segments. These associations work against textual hierarchization. "The fragmented mode of attention means," to quote Fiske again, "that the viewer views some segments more intently than others; this is paralleled semiotically by the viewer's ability to give greater significance to some segments than others" (63). "Attention has to be solicited and grasped segment by segment" (Morley 172). This decontextualization creates the basis for a screening-process in which the viewer seeks out those signs and segments that are of special use for his or her imaginary. The emotional ties to the program may be weak, but the endless supplementarity of television's flow provides constant nourishment for the imaginary. And the fact that the impact of the material is not strong and overwhelming, as it is ideally in film, can also be seen as a chance to take in as much as possible in what critics have called the "coming up next-mechanism." The viewer is driven by the constant hope that the next sign or segment will finally satisfy his imaginary longings and thus keeps immersing herself in the flow of images and sounds.[42]

'being at home' without necessarily being an index of any specific intention to watch it. Similarly, Collet and Lamb's (1986) research reports that, in their sample, people were only in the room for about 80 per cent of the time the television was switched on and only spent 65 per cent of that time looking at the screen at all" (172f.).

41 The traditional concept for characterizing the television experience was that of a flow. As John Fiske points out, the concept of segmentation appears more adequate to describe recent developments: "Williams' famous characterization of television viewing as an experience of 'flow' is useful in so far as it stresses television's lack of textual boundaries, but within it he seems to suggest that the consequent contradictions and lack of formal organization are regrettable rather than a positive textual characteristic. Ellis's use of the term 'segmentation' is more productive: television's continuous flow is actually fragmented into an often jarring experience of segments in which discontinuity, sequence and contradiction take precedence over continuity, consequence, and unity. Channel switching and zapping merely exaggerate and exploit this characteristic. Segmented texts are marked by abrupt transitions from segment to segment that require active, experienced, televisually literate viewers to negotiate" (Fiske, "Moments of Television" 63).

42 Cf. E. Ann Kaplan: "TV's strategy is to keep us endlessly consuming in the hopes of

In this, the television flow is already close to the video-clip in which the stimulation of the imaginary is further maximized by a montage of quickly displaced images that correspond to the mood and the rhythm of the music and the coming-up-next-mechanism is serialized by the short duration of the songs. With the video-clip the potential for imaginary self-fashioning reaches a new level. The viewer/listener is fed images to help stimulate the imagination, but since these images are only briefly evoked, they function not as representations, but as suggestions for writing her own script on the basis of the associations evoked by the music. Thus, the associative logic of most video clips with their rather arbitrary linkage of images comes close to the shadowy structurelessness of the imaginary. But it provides the process of articulation with a rhythmic dynamic that accelerates the flow of images and hence creates the impression of having liberated the imaginary to articulate itself. The typical programming format for the presentation of video-clips with its endless sequels of short clips intensifies this experience of acceleration.[43] It also provides ever new triggers (and ever new chances) for the imaginary. Where the viewer/listener cannot relate to a particular clip, she will receive another chance three minutes later.[44] In the current media culture there is always another chance waiting; and with such technical devices as remote control, channel surfing, and video-taping one has the means at hand to seek out these chances with ease – a development that will reach a radically new dimenison with the possibilities created by PC technology, ranging from CD-Rom to the Internet and on to the prospects of interactive media.

IX. The De-Contextualization of Self-Expression

Recent developments in computer and internet-technology will open up an entirely new chapter in cultural history. To describe their dehierarchizing potential would require another essay. What is important to realize here, however, is that they present only the latest stage in a history of cultural dehierarchization that began with the arrival of the novel. This history is driven by an insatiable hunger of the individual for cultural self-empowerment and imaginary self-fashioning. Thus, the cultural history of Western societies and, specifically, American cultural history show one unmistakable tendency: As I have tried to show in this essay, they are characterized by a

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fulfilling our desire" (4).

43 On this point, see my essay on video clips, "Wie Alexis de Tocqueville uns helfen kann, die weltweite Resonanz der populären amerikanischen Musik zu verstehen."

44 Cf. Kaplan's characterization: "The 'coming up next' mechanism that is the staple of all serials is an intrinsic aspect of the minute-by-minute MTV watching. We are trapped by the constant hope that the next video will finally satisfy and, lured by the seductive promise of immediate plenitude, we keep endlessly consuming the short texts" (4).

continuous increase in the possibilities for cultural self-expression and imaginary self-fashioning. This steady increase is linked to a growing tendency to liberate expressive elements – and thereby separate the imaginary – from moral, social and narrative contexts.[45] Image and sound can achieve this best. Film and television, popular music and the music-clip have therefore become the world-wide engines of this cultural development. Popular music, in fact, is the form in which this tendency toward imaginary self-empowerment and the decontextualization of expressive elements is most obvious.[46] One may even trace this development within the history of popular music, in the movement from melody (which usually still tries to tell a story that corresponds to the mood of the song) to rhythm which has its analogy in bodily self-expression, that is, in "self-fashioning without thinking" (Palmer 61).[47] The story of

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[45] This provides an explanation for the wide-spread impression that popular culture has become more and more a-social and narcissistic. It is part of the liberation of expressive elements that violence or sexuality are increasingly presented in decontextualized fashion, without, or with only a flimsy, narrative justification, and hence for their own sake.

[46] Again, technological developments have played a major role in this increasing usefulness of popular music. The move from 78 rpm discs to 33 rpm (made possible by the invention of high fidelity in 1948) and then to 45 rpm discs is one of these developments. Even more important was the invention of the magnetic tape in World War II which made it "possible for anyone to record anywhere - all you needed was a tape recorder" (Barlow 76). Both developments contributed decisively to a decentralization within the record industry which paved the way for a growing number of smaller record companies and different commercial music markets.

[47] Arnold Palmer describes an important aspect of this incessant move toward rhythm: "Since James Brown and his fellow funkateers 'turned the beat around' in the mid-sixties, rock and roll, especially in its funk and hip-hop guises, has been stripping out the music's more European elements – chord changes, lyrical melodies, stanzaic song forms – and emphasizing the rhythmic interplay of voices and percussion. Melody instruments, such as guitars and horns, have become rhythm instruments. New elements such as turntable scratching, found-sound collage, and various rhythm machines, from basic beat box to sequencing technology, have been put to primarily rhythmic usages as well" (61). Palmer sees this tendency already at work in Bo Diddley's form of early rock and roll: "With hindsight, and a handful of late-sixties James Brown records, it isn't difficult to divine which way Bo Diddley's music was heading. The tendency is for every instrument to become a rhythm instrument. One song is differentiated from another not so much by melody (which tends to flatten out into a kind of chant) or harmony (which is reduced to one or two chord changes, or none at all) as by the particular character and content of its rhythmic organization and rhythmic wordplay" (75). On the crucial role of James Brown in that development, see also Barlow and Finley: "Brown was at the center of two major musical innovations during this period. One was to extend the rhythmic dimensions of a song until they totally dominated it. The bass lines and patterns came to the forefront of the music, and the rhythm section became, in effect, a lead instrument … His second innovation was to engage the audience in sermonlike storytelling, which anticipated the advent of rap and hip-hop music by more than a decade" (124f.). This storytelling does not stand

cultural dehierarchization is not only that of different media replacing one another. It can also be told from within each of the media with which I have been dealing here, for example by focusing on the history of film, with its shift from classical genre film to "event-movie," or on that of television with its characteristic trend of an ever growing segmentation of programs.

If what I have described is convincing, however, then we will have to change our use of the term "Americanization." The word would no longer describe a cunning form of cultural imperialism. It would refer us back to a process of cultural dehierarchization and growing individualization which is driven by the promise of ever-increasing possibilities of cultural self-expression and imaginary self-empowerment. For a number of reasons, this process is most advanced in the United States itself, where it has led to powerful and highly popular manifestations of a modern culture of performance. Where this culture is adopted in other parts of the world (usually driven by demands of a younger generation which is in flight from a tradition it considers as restrictive),[48] these countries and societies do not merely succumb to American influence or fall victim to clever marketing strategies. They also "modernize" society by catching up with a process of cultural dehierarchization and the promises of self-expression and self-empowerment it holds for the individual. However, because this process has its social costs, it is usually accompanied by a litany of complaint and accusation. This rhetorical ritual reflects a deep-seated ambivalence about the process of cultural dehierarchization. On the one hand, we may welcome increased opportunities for self-expression, on the other hand, we are worried about the extremes to which this self-empowerment is often carried in its Americanized forms, without being willing to admit that in a democratic society the one may not be had without the other.

In a way, the cultural dehierarchization I have been tracing in this essay can also be described as a process of democratization. Democratization, however, is not to be confused with democracy. In everday use, the word democracy often evokes an ideal of equality; democratization describes a process in which individual rights and opportunities are extended. Such an

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in contrast to the liberation of the rhythm. It merely adds another form of imaginary self-fashioning.

48 The habitual criticism of the destruction of native cultural traditions through American culture never considers the possibility that, as a form of cultural self-definition, these traditions may be very limited and may be experienced even as suffocating by the individual, because, in reflecting a strict social hierarchy, they only provide one possible role and source of self-esteem. Usually, the demise of these pre-indvidualistic traditions is bemoaned by those Western individuals on the outside who would like to escape the leveling effects of democracy by having a whole array of cultural choices spread out before their eyes. On this point, see the acute observation by John Tomlinson: "The critique of homogenisation may turn out to be a peculiarly Western-centred concern if what is argued is that cultures must retain their separate identities simply to make the world a more diverse and interesting place" (135).

extension does not always have positive consequences. Ironically enough, it can be bad for democracy, because it can lead to growing self-absorption and social fragmentation. In the realm of culture, it can change the nature of the public sphere.[49] One may argue that in current discussions the one term – democratization – is reserved for the positive aspects of cultural dehierar-chization and that it has become customary, on the other hand, to reserve the term Americanization for the negative consequences of the same process. For "critical theory," democratization can obviously only be conceptualized as a process in which remaining power structures are eliminated, and not as a process which, often at the same time, also fuels and liberates an asocial desire for self-empowerment.

Americanization, as I have described it in this essay, is an effect of modernization – not in the sense of economic modernization theory but in the sense of the project of modernity. Americanization is, in fact, an unforeseen result of modernization and therefore it is highly embarrassing to some advocates of the promise of modernity. American companies do their best to take advantage and exploit this constellation, but its basis lies in the promise of self-development and self-realization ushered in by modernity.[50] In this view, modernization has unleashed an unlimited and ever escalating dynamic of imaginary self-empowerment that is driven, as Marshall Berman has put it in his study of modernity, by a restless individualism. Or, as John Tomlinson has pointed out in his book Cultural Imperialism: "Cultures are 'condemned to modernity' not simply by the 'structural process of economic development, and an increasing rationality, but by the human process of self-development and a struggle for self-realization" (141). What we have to realize is that American popular culture, contrary to its image as a mindless, standardized mass product, is not the deplorable counter-point to this modern culture of self-development, but an unexpected manifestation and consequence of it.

If this is true, however, the world is not being Americanized. Rather, the world constantly Americanizes itself. And, if we do not like the results, we should not blame cultural imperialism but we should look more closely at the forces of individualization which drive this development and which engage us as much as the people for which we claim to speak. It is indeed part of the

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49 In the United States, for example, the radio was the avantgarde medium for a new stage of interest group democracy, for, as production costs sank, specific groups could be targeted. In this interest- and target-group culture, one does no longer have to expose oneself to what interests and concerns others. Instead, one can stay within the boundaries of one's own interests. It is part of the story of cultural dehierarchiza-tion that the technical possibilities of the mass media transform the public spheres of democratic societies in far-reaching and not always positive ways.

50 In this sense, "Americanization" is not a phenomenon restricted to the mass media or to popular culture. It also manifests itself in the economic and social realm where the same relentless search for individual self-empowerment is at work as in the cultural realm.

fascination and the fear which American society holds for a European that America carries this wish for individual and imaginary self-empowerment to ever new extremes and that the critical and radical theories mushrooming in American cultural criticism ignore this aspect almost completely – perhaps because they are so much a part of it.

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