

CALIFORNIA BLUE

Americanization as Self-Americanization



Winfried Fluck

The “Toolbox” View of Culture

My first encounter with American popular culture took place in bombed-out Berlin in 1949. I was five years old at the time. Among our neighbors was a woman who managed to support herself by entertaining American GIs on the weekends. On Saturday mornings, she would call my friend and me up to her apartment and ask us to do her grocery shopping for the weekend. Then, upon our return, she would reward us with chewing gum and Superman comics. My friend and I enjoyed the pictures, but we could not yet read, neither German nor English, and thus could not really make sense of the text. The pleasures we derived from those comics came from a more elementary level. I particularly remember the strong presence of an intense blue in Superman’s dress as well as in the sky through which he moved, a blue that gained an almost magical quality in our dreary, colorless surroundings. My father had once told me that there was a country called California where the sky was always blue, and so, in an act of arbitrary but creative linkage, the blue of Superman comics became a vision of “California blue” for me.

This transformation of a piece of cheap, cheesy popular culture into an almost magical object illustrates three points I want to make in the following essay on Americanization.¹ To start with, it illustrates a point of agreement the Americanization debate appears to have reached on the key question of effect. In this debate, something like a bottom-line consensus has emerged. Past descriptions of Americanization as a form of cultural imperialism, the argument goes, were based on a surprisingly naive theory of effect and completely disregarded the possibility that different uses could be made of the

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same text or program. In his discussion of theories of cultural imperialism, John Tomlinson summarizes the objections: "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media theorists have assumed."² In most discussions of Americanization, the cultural imperialism thesis has therefore been replaced by more complex models of reappropriation, negotiation, and creolization.³ One of the pioneers of the argument that cultural material is never simply absorbed as a model but reappropriated in different contexts for different needs and purposes is the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, who, in his essay "Networks of Americanization," applies this "toolbox" view of culture to the question of Americanization: "As an alternative to the phrase 'the American influence on Sweden,' we could speak of 'American culture as a resource for Swedes,' and then find that it consists of a great many parts, of different appeal to different people."⁴ My own childhood focus on the magic of color provides an example for such selective, often highly idiosyncratic forms of reappropriation.⁵

My willful transformation of "Superman blue" into "California blue" also foregrounds a second point: the uses recipients will make of popular culture remain unpredictable, because users often attach utopian longings to seemingly banal objects that originate in entirely different historical and personal circumstances. Thus, culture, including popular culture, can represent something that goes far beyond the overt level of meaning and can hardly be understood by others. These hidden sources of aesthetic experience play a crucial role in the gratification cultural objects provide. This, in turn, draws attention to a third point: somatic responses to the "immediate experience" of image, color, and sound can trigger such transfer processes more easily and effectively than moral claims or intellectual arguments. One may argue, as I do in this essay, that the much debated issue of identification with fictional texts is not so much, or at least not primarily, a question of identification with a particular character but with much more elementary dimensions of aesthetic experience.

Why are these important points for a reconsideration of the issue of Americanization? Discussions of Americanization remain incomplete and unconvincing as long as they do not take the phenomenon of selective appropriation, the fact of different contexts of use, and the varying, often unpredictable effects cultural objects can have into consideration. This also means that cultural Americanization cannot be analyzed convincingly by merely identifying economic or political interests. It is certainly important to register and document such interests, which often play an underestimated role, as Volker Berghahn has demonstrated in his recent analysis of the role of American cul-

tural politics in postwar Germany.⁶ However, such economic and political interests can only be realized if the material they offer is effective. Discussions of cultural Americanization therefore have to attempt to account for the worldwide resonance of American popular culture. What my childhood example suggests is a point I have emphasized repeatedly in debates on Americanization: the complicating fact about Americanization is that it often takes the form of self-Americanization. In the final analysis, we are not being Americanized. We Americanize ourselves!

American Popular Culture as Modern Culture

To counter fears of Americanization by pointing out that its impact is weakened and its meaning transformed in the act of reception is still a defensive argument, however. Fortunately, things do not seem to be quite as bad as expected. Nevertheless, the premises on which fears of Americanization were based in the past—the apocalyptic vision of an invasion that destroys authentic cultures—still provide the basis for this argument. Yet, the extent to which the issue of Americanization has changed since the 1950s—which remain the favorite point of reference for discussions of an Americanization of Germany—is illustrated by a recent article in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*. American television series, the article informs us, are actually in retreat in Germany: either they are dropped altogether or they have been relegated to the late-night hours, way after prime time.⁷ This in itself is surprising enough, but the explanation given is even more amazing. In effect, with a grain of salt, one could almost consider it a candidate for the final word on the Americanization debate; and, as is often the case in history, what began as a grand melodrama of victimization appears to end as provincial farce. The reason given in *Der Spiegel* for the declining role of American television exports is that a new generation of American series are too sophisticated, too irreverent, too self-ironic, too fast-paced for a German audience that has come to prefer a more homely and home-grown product. For someone who has witnessed years of dire predictions that, as a consequence of Americanization, quality programs will be displaced by standardized mass fare, this triumph of provincial German pop culture over a by now more sophisticated American product certainly provides an amusing turn in the debate. In the context of our discussion, it also illustrates a second line of defense in the Americanization debate that may be called the regionalization argument, in contrast to the cultural toolbox argument. As the case of diminished market shares of American television shows reveals, regional tastes can defeat global marketing strategies, thereby confirming the growing importance of national or regional adaptations in a period of globalization.

At first sight, the article in *Der Spiegel* may be seen to provide further, and perhaps final, proof that fears of Americanization are unfounded. However, it can also be read differently, because, depending on one's point of view, one may argue that it confirms the apprehensions of critics of Americanization. German television series may have successfully asserted themselves against American competitors, Turkish-German rap groups may have successfully established their own local version of hip-hop, the German video clip station VIVA may hold its own against MTV, but the format in each case is still American. My examples of national or regional self-assertion therefore do not necessarily confirm that Americanization is in retreat. On the contrary, the point can be made that Americanization has been so successful and all-pervasive in its influence that it has inspired its own regional off-shots. This is, after all, the claim that lies at the center of the critique of American mass culture by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno and several generations of critical intellectuals in their wake.

Horkheimer and Adorno's chapter on the American culture industry in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not a discussion of the Americanization of Germany but of the historical emergence and growing dominance of a new type of culture, described as either American mass culture or as a culture industry, a standardized, completely commercialized product that, in the bleak views of Horkheimer and Adorno, is on the way to become *the* representative modern culture.⁸ When we discuss the problem of a possible Americanization of German culture, we are not thinking of Ernest Hemingway or Saul Bellow or Toni Morrison, but of American mass or popular culture. At a closer look, Americanization is thus really another word for the fear that a particular type of American popular culture—symbolized by Hollywood and similarly powerful institutions of the American culture industry—may become the exemplary and dominant form of modern culture. From this point of view, the toolbox argument, which argues that uses of culture are selective and that therefore we cannot simply equate the product with its function and effect, may be valid as far as it goes, but it does not address the more central question. Ultimately, the question of what we think of Americanization depends on what we think of American popular culture as a specifically modern culture.

A Brief History of American Popular Culture

This shift in focus leads us back to what I regard as the major explanatory challenge in the Americanization debate. How can the stunning worldwide resonance of American popular culture be explained?⁹ In the cultural imperialism paradigm, this popularity reflects the clever manipulation of audiences

and markets; in liberal counterarguments, it is the high professionalism or democratic promise of American popular culture, which, in the toolbox and regionalization versions, is then taken back to the unpredictable use-value of single components. My own answer has been presented in more expansive form in other contexts and publications to which I may refer those looking for more than the following condensed version of a detailed historical account.¹⁰ In view of limited space, I summarize here an extended argument in the shortest possible form.

The significance of the phenomenon of popular culture for cultural history lies in its response to the problems of cultural access and accessibility (in the sense of cultural literacy). Traditionally, access to cultural life in Western societies depended on social standing, economic means, and a high degree of cultural literacy. For example, books before the nineteenth century were expensive and often required an education in classical languages and mythology. The phrase "popular culture" basically refers to cultural forms that undermine or abolish these conditions of access.¹¹ In this process, American society was especially effective for a number of reasons, among them the lack of strong national cultural centers that would be able to shape cultural expression on the basis of the aesthetic or educational criteria of an elite.¹² Cultural elites in America never had enough authority to establish nationally accepted cultural standards.

Within a socially, regionally, and ethnically diversified context, two factors made American popular culture unique, gave it a head start internationally, and provide an explanation for its amazing worldwide popularity. Both factors are tied to the multiethnic composition of American society. First, American popular culture profited from a variety of multiethnic influences. This is most obvious in the realm of popular music, where the resulting hybrid mixed European and African traditions in a highly original fashion and was clearly something no other country had to offer at the time. Second, because of the multiethnic composition of its audiences, American popular culture faced a market that resembled today's global market in its diversity and multilingual nature, so that a need emerged early on to find a common language that would be able to overcome the heterogeneity of audiences.¹³ In other words, before the Americanization of other societies could occur, American culture itself had to be "Americanized."

The response of American popular culture to this challenge—and, by implication, to the questions of access and accessibility—was simplification and reduction. The novel, which is the first medium of modern popular culture in the Western world, is already a reduction of the epic; the dime novel, in turn, is a reduction of the novel in terms of narrative complexity and psychological characterization. Each of these reductions increases cultural accessibility, and, because this means increased sales and cheaper production, the

possibility of social access also increases. However, in order to read a dime novel, one still has to read English. In terms of accessibility, writing, no matter how reduced it is in its requirements for cultural literacy, has obvious limits. Images and music, on the other hand, have obvious advantages. While even the image still requires a certain cultural literacy in the sense of the ability to master a visual code, music can reduce such potential barriers of accessibility even further. Thus, film and television, but above all popular music, have therefore been the driving forces in the Americanization of modern culture.

Traditionally, it is exactly this phenomenon of reduction that is the target of cultural critics, because it is seen as result of a race for the bottom line in taste. But when silent movies directors like D.W. Griffith tried to develop a filmic language that would be superior to theatrical melodrama in terms of accessibility and effect, they did not do so in search of the lowest common denominator in taste. For his part, Griffith pursued his goals as part of his artistic ambitions, because he realized that the reduction in cultural literacy made possible by filmic images opened up entirely new possibilities of expression. The reduction to which I refer here is, in other words, primarily the result of a transformation of cultural expression by technological developments like printing, film, amplified music, and so on—developments that facilitate accessibility but, at the same time, also create new possibilities of expression and aesthetic experience.

In my view, this development has gone in an unmistakable direction, redefining in the process criteria of cultural literacy. Cultural access and accessibility are constantly widened.¹⁴ At the same time, the individual's wishes for imaginary self-empowerment have been served more and more effectively—up to a point, for example, where the representation of violence has been taken almost completely out of moral or social contexts and is now presented largely for its own sake, that is, for the thrill it gives Hollywood's main target group, young (or not so young) males. This is an important point because it captures the major paradox produced by the development I have sketched. Contrary to the conventional wisdom of standardized mass production, resulting in growing conformity, American popular culture has been driven by a promise of providing ever more effective ways for imaginary self-empowerment and self-fashioning.¹⁵ In this sense, it has contributed to an ever-accelerating process of individualization in society.

By individualization I do not mean a movement toward individual autonomy (that would be individuality),¹⁶ but a growing dissociation from the authority of social claims and hence a pluralization of lifestyles. If popular culture is driven by increasing possibilities for imaginary self-empowerment and cultural self-fashioning, then Americanization, understood as worldwide dissemination of a certain type of culture, means that a process that for a

number of reasons is most advanced in the United States is taking hold in other parts of the world as well. This process is usually driven by the demands of a younger generation in flight from traditions it considers restrictive.¹⁷ What many cultural critics, including Americans who are embarrassed to have American society associated primarily with consumer culture and fast food icons, often do not understand is that even the most conventional and maligned symbols of American consumer culture such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's bear a connotation of informality that can still be experienced as liberating by young people in many parts of the world.¹⁸

Seen this way, Americanization is an effect of modernization—not in the sense of sociological and economic modernization theory with its teleology of progress and liberation, but in the sense of modernity's promise of self-development, which has been put at the center of cultural modernity in Marshall Berman's brilliant book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*.¹⁹ The problem is, however, that it is an unforeseen, almost embarrassing result of modernity's promise for self-development, for in place of self-cultivation and growing self-awareness, we get unrepentant forms of imaginary self-empowerment and self-fashioning. This, in effect, is the explanation for the strident dismissal of popular culture in the mass culture debates of the 1950s and thereafter, in which mass culture is seen as betrayal of the true task of culture, namely, to function as a counter-realm to the instrumental rationality of modernity.²⁰ What we have to realize and acknowledge in dealing with American popular culture, however, is that, contrary to its image as a mindless, standardized mass product, it is not the deplorable counterpoint to a modern culture of self-development but an unexpected manifestation and consequence of it.

“Embodiment”: Popular Culture and Aesthetic Experience

What do I actually mean by imaginary self-empowerment? To answer this, I want to return to the claim I made at the start of this essay of the existence of a bottom-line consensus in the current Americanization debate: the “culture as toolbox” thesis of selective appropriation and creative adaptation. Scholars have become fond of using this argument, but they do not seem interested in taking it one step further and inquiring about the reasons for the selectivity on the side of the recipient. As a rule, the obviously welcome implication seems to be that, fortunately, even the “masses” are much more resilient and self-determined than cultural critics were willing to assume in the past. For some, such as Dick Hebdige and members of the British Cultural Studies movement, the creative reassembly of elements of the dominant culture demonstrates the potential of youthful subcultures for cultural resistance.

But if such explanations were true, selective appropriation would have to be a restricted phenomenon, since, obviously, not everybody can be equally resilient and creative. However, selective use is an across-the-board phenomenon. There is, by definition, no reception of any text that is not selective. Other reasons must exist, then, for the phenomenon. Again, I have to condense a complex argument developed in other contexts.²¹

The elementary fact about aesthetic objects is that, in order to acquire meaning, they have to be actualized by means of a transfer. This is most obvious in the case of literature. Since we have never met literary characters such as Huck Finn or Madame Bovary and do in fact know that they never existed, we have to bring them to life by investing our own associations, feelings, and even bodily sensations. This means that in the act of reception, the text or object comes to represent two things at the same time: the world of the text and imaginary elements added to it by the reader in the act of actualizing the words on the page. It is exactly this “doubleness” that can be seen as an important source of aesthetic experience, because it allows us to do two things at the same time: to articulate imaginary elements and to look at them from the outside. Aesthetic experience is a state “in-between” in which, as result of the doubling structure of fictionality, we are, in the words of Wolfgang Iser, “both ourselves and someone else at the same time.”²²

This may sound convincing in the case of reading, but it also applies to the case of film or other forms of visual representation. Although, in watching a film, we see Humphrey Bogart or Rita Hayworth in front of us and thus do no longer have to imagine what characters like Rick or Gilda may look like, we still have to invest feelings and bodily sensations of our own in order to understand, to give but one example, what it means to be disappointed in love. In effect, one may argue that the development I have traced, from print to image to sound, also describes a development in which our own involvement as recipients becomes more and more direct, unmediated and therefore body-centered. In this context, it is important to take into account that the transfer I have described does not merely apply to characters. It pertains to every aspect of the text or object.²³ We also have to actualize the villains, the emotional conflicts, even the representation of rain by means of our own imagination, our feelings, and our own bodily sensations.²⁴ In this way, we spread our own interiority all over the text. This, then, is what I mean by imaginary self-empowerment: not a scenario of imaginary wish fulfillment or self-aggrandizement but an extension of the interiority of the recipient in the act of actualization that provides the basis for aesthetic experience.

The trigger to engage in transfer processes that extend one's own interiority is becoming ever more powerful in the history of modern culture. To be drawn into a novel so that one forgets the outside world is already a form of complete absorption that can involve strong experiences of pain as well as a

well-deserved relief from emotional turmoil at the end. The reader feels in the grip of the story and has to “work” for his pleasure. The German term *Lesehunger*, the hunger for reading, draws attention to the addictive dimension such emotional involvement can have. In the next step, the dime novel, where requirements of mental processing are reduced, emotions are triggered in a more superficial, but also a more direct and sensationalist manner. Long-drawn emotional labor is replaced by short, quick “cheap thrills.” In the culture of performance around the turn of the century, in which physical attraction and skills are now displayed for their own sake, a heightened awareness of the body is created not only on the level of representation but also on that of reception. Since such cultural forms as the new “animal dances” or the physical pleasures and thrills of the amusement park do not claim to have any deeper meaning, they invite somatic responses in direct, unmediated fashion.

The tremendous impact of film lies in its successful combination of the emotional involvement (and psychological grip) of the novel with the direct physical involvement of the culture of performance. “To go to the movies” is an event because, as a rule, it links cognitive activity, emotional turmoil, and bodily sensations in a tightly knit, skillfully orchestrated package. Experience can thus become more important than content: “Legions of viewers and critics proclaim their abhorrence of the politics of Ford and Capra films, to say nothing of Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, yet willingly submit, and repeatedly resubmit, to these films' emotional resonance.”²⁵ Such involvement would not be possible, if it would result merely from an identification with character or plot, as Affron points out by drawing on Claudine Eizykman's “energetics” of response: “Claudine Eizykman provides strong counterargument to the notion of passive spectatorship at the cinema in her elaboration of an ‘energetics’ (*énergétique*) of response. She evokes the violent effect made by film on the viewer who, after leaving the movie house, feels ‘extremely undone, perforated, shaken by a thousand intensities much stronger than those of television, by a thousand light beams more refractive than those of any pictorial, musical, or theatrical space.’ A desire for such violence runs counter to a desire for repose and passivity.” (11) The hyperactive quality and sensory overload of recent Hollywood movies—resulting from high-speed cutting, an all-encompassing bombardment of the senses and a preference for directly visceral genres such as the horror or the action movie—presents a new stage in the creation of an immediate somatic experience.

However, in this “embodiment” popular music can go even further, because there is no longer any need to process words on the page or link images in a narrative flow. As the colloquial German term *Ohrwurm* suggests, popular music is highly effective in “worming” its way into the listener's ear almost imperceptibly. No intellectual or cognitive processing of its content is required because it makes no claim to inform, instruct, or represent meaning. Instead,

its effect is based on moods and bodily sensations. The characteristic form in which music activates the imagination is by short evocations of decontextualized images, or a sensation of being one with the music, both of which do not have to be integrated into any meaningful narrative. Listeners of popular music need no longer “earn” their aesthetic experience through participation. Contrary to prior visual forms of cultural expression, including the movies, there is no need for continuity in the flow of images; contrary to what happens with a novel, no mental translation is required because the sensuous effect of music creates associations that are shaped not by narrative but by mood. In the video clip, this effect becomes the key principle for textual organization.

The development of popular culture from novel to image to sound has thus created cultural forms of expression that are increasingly effective for the purposes of imaginary self-empowerment and self-extension. In the process, the individual’s engagement with the cultural object gets more and more somatic, so that the gratification derived from popular culture becomes increasingly “embodied.”²⁶ The process of individualization I have postulated is thus, upon closer analysis, also a process of increasing embodiment, until “self-empowerment” derives from the unquestioned authority of a directly felt somatic experience in which the body provides both the basis for, and the measure of, the power of an aesthetic experience. The development of American popular culture I have traced is driven by an ongoing search to maximize this effect until, as in techno music, to give but one recent example, it is reduced to bass sounds of such forcefulness that the body is literally penetrated and shaken up. However, such a “pain” appears welcome. Clearly, the individual not only in Western societies is searching for ever more intense experiences of “embodiment.”²⁷ As applied to the history of popular culture, individualization, then, means to search for experiences that support and confirm one’s own sense of self as an “embodied” interiority.²⁸ It is this search that transforms Americanization into self-Americanization.

As Richard Shusterman, in following the late Michel Foucault, has pointed out, such an individual use of culture changes culture’s function: from self-development to the “care of one’s self”: “Life poses an artistic project in calling for creative self-expression and aesthetic self-fashioning.”²⁹ We have moved from a representative aristocratic culture and a bourgeois culture of self-development to an American culture of the self. American popular culture played a crucial role in this process, but the process goes far beyond popular cultural forms and includes contemporary high culture, which also focuses on developing “embodied” forms of aesthetic experience. As Shusterman makes clear, the actual irony in the popular culture debate (and, by implication, the Americanization debate) consists in the fact that this phenomenon does not lead us away from aesthetics but right to what must be seen as a contemporary redefinition of it.³⁰

A Guest in the House

If we look at the issue of Americanization from the point of view presented here, today’s major challenge consists neither of the question of national ownership (which has become increasingly muddled in an age of economic globalization), nor of content, for, as we have seen, the same cultural object can have different functions in different contexts of use. Globalization has undermined both arguments because it has created a situation in which an American popular culture-type of modern culture is no longer necessarily American. And because of a worldwide process of self-Americanization, the question whether this form of modern culture is desirable or not has become almost obsolete. We have to accept it as a reality of modern life. As a rule, we have learned to integrate it into an ever-diversified cultural menu. High culture and regional culture have not become endangered species; on the contrary, they, too, have prospered in an increasingly differentiated cultural field.

Can the issue of Americanization then be put to rest? Not in one very specific sense; namely, the question of how, on what principles, culture should be organized and financed in the future. For me, the real challenge emerging from Americanization is no longer whether we get the wrong kind of culture but whether we are drifting toward an American model of organizing and financing culture. The problem is not how much American culture we want but how far we want to go in the commercialization of culture. Why not extend the market principles that have driven the worldwide success of American popular culture to culture as a whole? Should European societies continue cultural policies to subsidize local film industries, public radio and television networks, opera houses, theaters, symphony orchestras, that is, all those cultural forms that would have a hard time surviving in the market, even if foundations and philanthropists would try to compensate?

In my view, this kind of state support for culture should be continued. For making this argument, we do not have to go back to the Americanization debate in its original form and claim that the culture deserving subsidization is the artistically or qualitatively superior culture. Anybody who has witnessed the results of several decades of public financial support for the German film industry will not seriously want to make such a claim any more. More to the point, one should argue for a cultural variety that goes beyond regional variants of American popular culture; this involves political decisions about which forms of culture should remain important elements of the public sphere. A second argument is to emphasize national or regional interests in media industries for economic reasons.³¹ Just as no pure market policies exist in economic life, not even in the United States, it is counterproductive to expose media industries with a weak capital base to the market without protection or support. If one wants to compete, one has to support capital-

intensive media until they can survive in the marketplace. Finally, although the market has always played a role in the arts since patronage went out of fashion, an argument can be made that culture should not rely entirely on the market. In the final analysis, this decision revolves around which values take priority in a society. This issue, in effect, provides the point of departure for the continuation of the Americanization debate. It is one thing to welcome somebody as a guest in the house, but quite another to make sure that he does not take over the whole house.

Notes

1. Throughout the following essay, the use of the word "Americanization" will be restricted to the issue of cultural Americanization.
2. John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism* (Baltimore, 1991), 49-50. For a more recent assessment of the Americanization debate from a similar perspective, see the essay by Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, "Modernization's Challenge to Traditional Values: Who's Afraid of Ronald McDonald," *The Futurist* 35 (2001): 16-21. As the authors argue: "The impression that we are moving toward a uniform 'McWorld' is partly an illusion. The seemingly identical McDonald's restaurants that have spread throughout the world actually have different social meanings and fulfill different social functions in different cultural zones." (18) "Economic development tends to push societies in a common direction, but rather than converging they seem to move along paths shaped by their cultural heritages. Therefore we doubt that the forces of modernization will produce a homogenized world culture in the foreseeable future." (20) From a semiotic perspective, this variability of interpretation is opened up by the fact that different codes are applied, as Umberto Eco already pointed out in the 1960s: "The Receiver transforms the Signal into Message, but this message is still the empty form to which the Addressee can attribute various meanings depending on the Code he applies to it." "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare," *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York, 1986), 139.
3. See, for example, Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity* (New York, 1992) and Joana Breidenbach and Ina Zukrigl, *Tanz der Kulturen. Kulturelle Identität in einer globalisierten Welt* (Hamburg, 2000).
4. *Networks of Americanization. Aspects of the American Influence in Sweden*, ed. Rolf Lunden (Uppsala, 1992), 15.
5. In his influential book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London, 1979), Dick Hebdige employs the transformation of a "humble object" into a "magic object" as exemplary case for a description of the process of cultural reappropriation: "The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life. To turn once more to the examples used in the Introduction, to the safety pins and tubes of vaseline, we can see that such commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to 'illegitimate' as well as 'legitimate' uses. These 'humble objects' can be magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination." (17f.) See also Hebdige's book *Hiding in the Light* (London, 1988), in which he applies this argument to American popular culture: "American popular culture (...) offers a rich iconography, a set of symbols, objects and artifacts which can be assembled and re-assembled by different groups in a literally limitless number of combinations. And the meaning of each selection is transformed as individual objects (...) are taken out of their original historical and cultural contexts and juxtaposed against signs from other sources." (74)
6. Volker Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe. Shepard Stone between Philanthropy, Academy, and Diplomacy* (Princeton, 2001).
7. As a recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* points out, this appears to be a worldwide trend: "Whereas American TV shows used to occupy prime-time slots, they are now more typically on cable, or airing in late-night or weekend slots," said Michael Grindon, president of Sony Television International. "The most valuable slots in the television landscape—network prime time—are now really reserved for locally produced shows." The article continues, "Given the choice foreign viewers often prefer homegrown shows that better reflected local tastes, cultures and historical events to American programs, executives said." The article ends with the—in the light of the Americanization debate—stunning conclusion: "The worldwide television market is growing," said David Hulbert, president of Walt Disney Television International, "but America's place in it is declining." "American TV losing out in global ratings war," *International Herald Tribune*, 2 January 2003. In the meantime, Neal Gabler has responded by arguing for a somewhat reduced and readjusted version of the Americanization thesis: "Still, one shouldn't mourn the end of American cultural domination quite yet. There will always be the movies. And the truth is, American movies, not TV shows, are the truly potent examples of U.S. cultural imperialism." "U.S. cultural hegemony lives on in movies, not TV," *International Herald Tribune*, 10 January 2003.
8. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944] (New York, 2002), 120-67. Horkheimer and Adorno's view of this development is bleak, because for them the new forms of culture erase the true task of culture, namely, to function as a counter-realm to the instrumental rationality of modernity. The only hope for resistance against the growing dominance of this instrumental rationality would be a radical culture of negation. American mass culture is a culture of negation on the level neither of content nor of form. On the contrary, it provides an especially effective, "modern" form of domination, because it has found ways to inscribe itself into the psyche of its consumers: "The analysis Tocqueville offered a century ago has in the meantime proved wholly accurate. Under the private culture monopoly it is a fact that 'tyranny leaves the body free and directs its attacks at the soul' (...) As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them." (133f.)
9. See the cautious way in which Tomlinson tries to move away from left orthodoxy on this question: "These are difficult generalisations to make with any certainty, but we can safely say that a substantial number of people in developed societies are willing recipients of 'imperialist media texts' such as *Dallas*. This is not to say they are consequently the dupes of their ideological messages and values. There is also *prima facie* evidence that plenty of people in the 'underdeveloped world' are enthusiastic about the cultural products of the

- West though, again, the uses and meanings attached to them cannot be easily assumed." *Cultural Imperialism*, 94.
10. See my essays "Emergence or Collapse of Cultural Hierarchy? American Popular Culture Seen from Abroad," *Popular Culture in the United States*, Peter Freese and Michael Porsche, eds. (Essen, 1994), 49-74, "Amerikanisierung' der Kultur. Zur Geschichte der amerikanischen Populärkultur," *Die Amerikanisierung des Medienalltags*, ed. Harald Wenzel (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), 13-52, and "Amerikanisierung und Modernisierung," *Transit* 17 (1999): 55-71.
 11. Of course, religious culture also was a "popular" alternative to aristocratic and bourgeois forms of culture, but still in a very ritualized and hence highly restricted form. As Neal Gabler argues, however, there is a point of convergence of religion and popular culture in American cultural history in evangelical Protestantism, "a form of worship that would have been unrecognizable to most Europeans." *Life: The Movie. How Entertainment Conquered Reality* (New York, 1998), 24. Gabler continues by pointing out "the similarities and affinities between evangelicalism and entertainment." (25)
 12. In his study *Highbrow/Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), Lawrence Levine traces the emergence of the idea of highbrow culture in America. However, it is significant that his narrative stops before the arrival of American modernism with its dehierarchized, often vernacular, and racially hybrid forms. In the way it is described by Levine, highbrow control over American culture is a phenomenon of the late Victorian period.
 13. One of the answers at the time of increased immigration around 1900 was the development of a nonverbal culture of performance, which draws its attraction from the presentation of spectacular skills and physical attractions "for their own sake," that is, without implying any deeper meaning. Important aspects of this development around the turn of the century are described by John Kasson, *Amusing the Million. Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1978); Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out. New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Chicago, 1981); Robert Snyder, *The Voice of the City. Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York, 1989); David Nasaw, *Going Out. The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); Lauren Rabinowitz, *For the Love of Pleasure. Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), and by various essays in the book *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz, eds. (Berkeley, 1995). In order to describe the special contribution of the silent film to this new culture of performance and exhibition. Tom Gunning has introduced the concept 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.
 14. I am using the term "individual" here in the Tocquevillian sense of the smallest social unit, not as a word for a philosophical concept of individuality.
 15. The term "self-empowerment" is employed here in a much larger sense than that of an identification with a better version of oneself. Because of the processes of reduction to easily accessible visual and aural forms and because of the growing textual fragmentation of cultural objects into short segments, single images, or musical moods, the individual encounters ever more favorable conditions for satisfying imaginary longings, emotional needs, and bodily sensations.
 16. Critical theory, following in the wake of Horkheimer and Adorno, has argued, of course, that the rise of popular culture signals the end of culture's function to nourish a process of self-development in which the individual grows in self-awareness. Instead, the culture industry produces "pseudo-individuality": "In the culture industry the individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardization of the means of production. He is tolerated only so long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. Pseudo individuality is rife: from the standardized jazz improvisation to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality. What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such. The defiant reserve or elegant appearance of the individual on show is mass-produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimeters." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 154. Obviously, this description of "mass-produced individuality" depends on a normative concept of individualization as leading up to a unique individuality, as Axel Honneth points out: "*Den normativen Rahmen aber, in dem diese geschichtsphilosophische Argumentation eingebettet ist, stellt eine ästhetische Theorie der gelingenden Ichbildung dar...*" ["The normative frame of reference for this philosophical argument is provided by an aesthetic theory of successful ego-formation..."] (author's translation). "Foucault und Adorno. Zwei Formen einer Kritik der Moderne," *Post-moderne' oder Der Kampf um die Zukunft*, ed. Peter Kemper (Hamburg, 1988), 140.
 17. 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-individualistic 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 homogenization may turn out to be a peculiarly Western-centered concern if what is argued is that cultures must retain their separate identities simply to make the world a more diverse and interesting place." *Cultural Imperialism*, 135.
 18. The crucial role "youth" has played in the worldwide reception of American popular culture is emphasized by David Ellwood in his essay *Anti-Americanism in Western Europe: A Comparative Perspective*, Occasional Paper No. 3, European Studies Seminar Series (Bologna, 1999), 25-33. See also Volker Berghahn in his introduction to the German Historical Institute conference "The American Impact on Western Europe": "On the German side the 'Americanizers,' it seems, were very much young people who responded positively, indeed enthusiastically, to what arrived from across the Atlantic. The resistance to these imports came from an older generation who rejected rock and jazz, James Dean and Coca-Cola as products of an *Unkultur*." "Conceptualizing the American Impact on Germany: West German Society and the Problem of Americanization," available at <www.ghi-dc.org>. In his essay "Über die Europäisierung Amerikas" ("On the Europeanization of America") in the paper *Das Parlament*, Gero Lenhardt gives an example for the easy fit between fast food and youth: "To go to fast food restaurants means to be liberated from the strictures of class etiquette. It is a liberation from the strain of presenting oneself properly in the public sphere. (...) To be sure, everything is standardized but this also has an egalitarian dimension. Questions of social rank become irrelevant. Everybody is taken equally serious as a customer who pays." *Das Parlament. Beilage*. (26 December 1987), 13 (author's translation). Lenhardt goes on to argue that this must be especially attractive for children and young people who are usually treated as inferior.

19. See Marshall Bertram, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernism* (London, 1983), who analyzes cultural modernity as a culture of restless individualism, driven by a promise of self-development, and chapter 5 of John Tomlinson's study *Cultural Imperialism*, in which he writes, "Cultures are 'condemned to modernity' not simply by the 'structural' process of economic development, but by the human process of self-development." (141)
20. Cf. the anthologies edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, *Mass Culture. The Popular Arts in America* (New York, 1957) and *Mass Culture Revisited* (New York, 1971), as well as the volume *Culture for the Millions: Mass Media in Modern Society*, ed. Norman Jacobs (Boston, 1961). The argument that the United States has been an importer as well as an exporter of culture—useful as it is in drawing attention to complex forms of cultural contact and exchange—therefore misses the essential point in the critique of American popular culture—namely, the fact that within the American context a new type of culture has been created that betrays culture's "true" function. It is therefore also besides the point to contrast "American" versus "European" views on the subject, because there are also numerous American critics of American popular culture who question its status as culture, as Paul R. Gorman has pointed out in his book *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, 1996). The issue of Americanization is, in the final analysis, not a debate about the merits of American culture but about the direction modern culture is taking.
21. See the following essays: "Aesthetics and Cultural Studies," *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, Emory Elliott, Lou Carton, and Jeffrey Rhyne, eds. (New York, 2001), 79-103; "Aesthetic Experience of the Image," *Iconographies of Power. The Politics and Poetics of Visual Representation*, Ulla Haselstein, Berndt Ostendorf, and Hans Peter Schneck, eds. (Heidelberg, 2003), 11-41; and "The Role of the Reader and the Changing Functions of Fiction: Reception Aesthetics, Literary Anthropology, *Funktionsgeschichte*," *European Journal of English Studies* 6 (2003): 253-71.
22. Wolfgang Iser, "Representation: A Performative Act," *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, 1989), 244.
23. This is one of the reasons why I find the concept of transfer more fitting here than the psychoanalytical concept of transference. Transference presupposes a deeply felt psychic drive, but not all aspects of the actualizing of the text will be shaped by the unconscious.
24. As Carol J. Clover puts it, "We are both Red Riding Hood and the Wolf; the force of the experience, the horror, comes from 'knowing' both sides of the story." "Her Body, Himself. Gender in the Slasher Film," *Fantasy and Cinema*, ed. James Donald (London, 1989), 95. Arguing against the theory of spectator positioning in apparatus theory, Steve Neale provides a helpful reminder of the continuous mobility of the viewer by drawing on John Ellis's book *Visible Fictions*: "Ellis argues that identification is never simply a matter of men identifying with male figures on the screen and women identifying with female figures. Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions, and roles. Identifications are multiple, fluid, at points even contradictory." "Masculinity as Spectacle," *Screening the Male. Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds. (London, 1993), 10. This nomadic mobility is even further enhanced, once we go beyond processes of identification and start at a more elementary level, that of actualizing a text or object by means of a transfer.
25. Charles Affron, *Cinema and Sentiment* (Chicago, 1982), 12.
26. My use of the term "embodiment" is thus not restricted to cultural constructions of the male or female body in representation and, hence, to a theory of gender identity as performance. It refers to a more elementary process of aesthetic experience "through" the body. In several books Richard Shusterman has provided interesting contributions to the conceptualization of a body aesthetic, which he calls "somaesthetics": "Somaesthetics is devoted to the critical, ameliorative study of one's experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aesthesis*) and creative self-fashioning." *Performing Live. Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, 2000), 138). See also his *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1992) and *Practicing Philosophy* (London, 1997).
27. The fact that "our body (...) now gets elevated, as our central medium, to the status of constructor and locus of the real" does not mean, however, that "this lived body is claimed as a 'primordial presence' that we directly grasp and directly move without any representation." Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 144, 149. To start with, our somatic responses rely "on prior constructions, on habits of response formed through the influence of historical and social conditions already in place." (150) Moreover, our responses are reciprocally conditioned by the object they structure. To describe the history of popular culture as a process of individualization that moves increasingly toward experiences of embodiment thus does not aim at the recovery of an elusive authenticity or spontaneity outside of cultural constructions but points out different means through which such constructions take hold. However, I postulate that representation and the individual's interiority that seeks articulation are never entirely identical. Although a cultural history of individualization and a theory of subjection are much closer related than the two terms "individualization" and "subjection" may suggest, a theory of subjection based on the idea of embodiment therefore appears insufficient to me. On the contrary, one may follow Judith Butler here, who has tried to clarify the psychic processes that can explain the possibility of resignification by arguing that discourses of subjection can at the same time function as stimuli for resignification. See her essay "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault," *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (London, 1995), 229-49.
28. By interiority I mean the full range of inner states, from mental images to moods and bodily sensations, that strive for articulation but can never be fully expressed.
29. Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 10. On page 11, he continues, "Today's aesthetic energies seem powerfully refocused on the art of living." See also his chapter "Postmodern Ethics and the Art of Living," in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, 236-61.
30. This does not, of course, mean that contemporary aesthetics have become "mindless," as Shusterman points out: "However, the claim that aesthetic experience must involve more than phenomenological immediacy and vivid feeling does not preclude that such immediate feeling is crucial to aesthetic experience." *Performing Live*, 21.
31. In his article "U.S. cultural hegemony lives on in movies, not TV," Neal Gabler argues that, in contrast to television, American movies will continue to be universal because they export "the primal aesthetic of excitement and individualism." *International Herald Tribune*, 10 January 2003. But excitement and individualism are no longer exclusively American values. Perhaps one reason for the success of American movies simply lies in the strong capital-base the American movie industry has. That the future area of struggle may no longer be cultural but commercial is indicated by the current clash over expiring copyright laws between the United States and Europe, which, in an obviously protectionist move, have been extended in the United States to 95 years (for works created by groups of people) and 70 years (for individual works), while copyright protection lasts 50 years in Europe—so that, for example, recordings of the early to mid-1950s have begun to enter the public domain in Europe. ("Europe set to sing to expiring copyrights," *International Herald Tribune*, 3 January 2003.

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