

EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

8. Working in groups, research abuses of power by U.S. agents, authorities, and troops since 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror. What evidence is there to suggest that Americans have engaged in torture, extraordinary rendition, and war crimes against civilians or prisoners of war? To what extent might these activities challenge the notion of American innocence?
9. Do some additional reading about the detention of suspected al-Qaeda supporters at Guantánamo. Would you agree that the United States has the right to hold suspected terrorists without trial, or does such open-ended detainment amount to a form of torture? What do you think should be done with the 400-plus inmates who remain incarcerated at Guantánamo?

Under the Sign of Mickey Mouse & Co.

TODD GITLIN

*Walt Disney's "Magic Kingdom" bills itself as the "Happiest Place on Earth," and that's exactly the way America's mass media present the United States, according to Todd Gitlin. Over the past twenty years American culture has been infiltrating nations all over the world, homogenizing traditional cultures into the kind of global "fun" culture that Disney is famous for. The question, of course, is whether it's good for Uzbek kids to spurn their parents' ways for Western styles or for American teens to groove to the beat of Third World music as they "shimmy" through the local mall. A nationally recognized authority on mass media, Todd Gitlin (b. 1943) has authored a novel and five works of nonfiction on popular culture and American society, including *Inside Prime Time* (1983), *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995), and *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (2001), the source of this selection. He is also the North American editor of *openDemocracy*, a member of the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine, and a faculty member of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.*

Everywhere, the media flow defies national boundaries. This is one of its obvious, but at the same time amazing, features. A global torrent is not, of course, the master metaphor to which we have grown accustomed. We're

more accustomed to Marshall McLuhan's *global village*.¹ Those who resort to this metaphor casually often forget that if the world is a global village, some live in mansions on the hill, others in huts. Some dispatch images and sounds around town at the touch of a button; others collect them at the touch of *their* buttons. Yet McLuhan's image reveals an indispensable half-truth. If there is a village, it speaks American. It wears jeans, drinks Coke, eats at the golden arches, walks on swooshed shoes, plays electric guitars, recognizes Mickey Mouse, James Dean, E.T., Bart Simpson, R2-D2, and Pamela Anderson.

At the entrance to the champagne cellar of Piper-Heidsieck² in Reims, in eastern France, a plaque declares that the cellar was dedicated by Marie Antoinette. The tour is narrated in six languages, and at the end you walk back upstairs into a museum featuring photographs of famous people drinking champagne. And who are they? Perhaps members of today's royal houses, presidents or prime ministers, economic titans or Nobel Prize winners? Of course not. They are movie stars, almost all of them American — Marilyn Monroe to Clint Eastwood. The symmetry of the exhibition is obvious, the premise unmistakable: Hollywood stars, champions of consumption, are the royalty of this century, more popular by far than poor doomed Marie.

Hollywood is the global cultural capital — capital in both senses. The United States presides over a sort of World Bank of styles and symbols, an International Cultural Fund of images, sounds, and celebrities. The goods may be distributed by American-, Canadian-, European-, Japanese-, or Australian-owned multinational corporations, but their styles, themes, and images do not detectably change when a new board of directors takes over. Entertainment is one of America's top exports.³ In 1999, in fact, film, television, music, radio, advertising, print publishing, and computer software together *were* the top export, almost \$80 billion worth, and while software alone accounted for \$50 billion of the total, some of that category also qualifies as entertainment — video games and pornography, for example. Hardly anyone is exempt from the force of American images and sounds. French resentment of Mickey Mouse, Bruce Willis, and the rest of American civilization is well known. Less well known, and rarely acknowledged by the French, is the fact that *Terminator 2* sold 5 million tickets in France during the month it opened — with no submachine guns at the heads of the

¹*Marshall McLuhan's global village*: Canadian communications theorist and educator, Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) believed that the modern electronic media would eventually blur regional and cultural differences and unite the world in a single global culture or community. [All notes are author's, except 1, 2, 5, 15, 18, 20, 29, and 30.]

²*Piper-Heidsieck*: Brand of French champagne.

³*America's top exports*: Economists Incorporated for the International Intellectual Property Alliance, Executive Summary, 2000_SIWEEK_EXEC.pdf. Thanks to Siva Vaidhyanathan for his discerning analysis of these statistics.

customers. The same culture minister, Jack Lang, who in 1982 achieved a moment of predictable notoriety in the United States for declaring that *Dallas* amounted to cultural imperialism, also conferred France's highest honor in the arts on Elizabeth Taylor and Sylvester Stallone. The point is not hypocrisy pure and simple but something deeper, something obscured by a single-minded emphasis on American power: dependency. American popular culture is the nemesis that hundreds of millions—perhaps billions—of people love, and love to hate. The antagonism and the dependency are inseparable, for the media flood—essentially American in its origin, but virtually unlimited in its reach—represents, like it or not, a common imagination.

How shall we understand the Hong Kong T-shirt that says “I Feel Coke”? Or the little Japanese girl who asks an American visitor in all innocence, “Is there really a Disneyland in America?” (She knows the one in Tokyo.) Or the experience of a German television reporter⁴ sent to Siberia to film indigenous life, who after flying out of Moscow and then traveling for days by boat, bus, and jeep, arrives near the Arctic Sea where live a tribe of Tungusians known to ethnologists for their bearskin rituals. In the community store sits a grandfather with his grandchild on his knee. Grandfather is dressed in traditional Tungusian clothing. Grandson has on his head a reversed baseball cap.

American popular culture is the closest approximation today to a global lingua franca,⁵ drawing the urban and young in particular into a common cultural zone where they share some dreams of freedom, wealth, comfort, innocence, and power—and perhaps most of all, youth as a state of mind. In general, despite the rhetoric of “identity,” young people do not live in monocultures. They are not monocular. They are both local and cosmopolitan. Cultural bilingualism is routine. Just as their “cultures”⁶ are neither hard-wired nor uniform, so there is no simple way in which they are “Americanized,” though there are American tags on their experience—low-cost links to status and fun. Everywhere, fun lovers, efficiency seekers, Americaphiles, and Americaphobes alike pass through the portals of Disney and the arches of McDonald's wearing Levi's jeans and Gap jackets. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, the multi-color chorus of Coca-Cola, and the next flavor of the month or the universe are the icons of a curious sort of one-world sensibility, a global semiculture. America's bid for global unification surpasses in reach that of the Romans,

⁴*a German television reporter*: This story is told by Berndt Ostendorf in “What Makes American Popular Culture So Popular: A View from Europe” (Odense, Denmark: Oasis, 2000).

⁵*lingua franca*: The commonly used language of trade or business.

⁶*Just as their “cultures”*: I benefited from a discussion about the overuse of the term *culture* with Kevin Robins, March 2, 2001.

the British, the Catholic, or Islam; though without either an army or a God, it requires less. The Tungusian boy with the reversed cap on his head does not automatically think of it as "American," let alone side with the U.S. Army.

The misleadingly easy answer to the question of how American images and sounds became omnipresent is: American imperialism. But the images are not even faintly force-fed by American corporate, political, or military power. The empire strikes from inside the spectator as well as from outside. This is a conundrum that deserves to be approached with respect if we are to grasp the fact that Mickey Mouse and Coke are everywhere recognized and often enough *enjoyed*. In the peculiar unification at work throughout the world, there is surely a supply side, but there is not only a supply side. Some things are true even if multinational corporations claim so: there is demand.