

Mixing High and Popular Culture: The Impact of the Communication Revolution

Frank Trommler

Thanks to electronic technologies of reproduction, the trade in images, stereotypes, fictions, myths, and fantasy has become a more significant economic factor than ever before. Cultural criticism of the superficial stimuli of television and entertainment electronics has tended to make the discourse about popular culture into a stocktaking of image production and semiotic strategies. The following observations try to go beyond this stocktaking and focus on the specific expansion of the international, especially American, communication industry across the Atlantic since the 1960s. It seems that the cultural implications of this expansion—often called a revolution—have rarely received the appropriate attention since most of its factors are tied to the realm of political economy rather than to the debates in the humanities. While the mixing of high and popular culture has been an ongoing process, it has visibly accelerated under the impact of the communication revolution—to the point where the boundaries between them lose their distinction and the overlap with communication fosters new notions of culture.

Culture as an Agent of Social and Political Change

First, let me sketch out some general remarks about the political and social importance of culture—including both high and popular culture from rock and pop music to movies, television, and literature—in the transformations of Europe in the era of the cold war.¹ Crucial is, of course, the distinction between high and popular culture, in which the latter was increasingly associated with the American entertainment

industry, although music and movie production for the masses had been a thriving European industry for a long time. In contrast, high culture was understood to represent the major achievements in literature, drama, classical music, and the arts with which the European nations had self-consciously built much of their identity over the centuries. In the first decades after World War II the rebuilding of Europe meant that politics rather than culture received primacy. Dependency of doctrines about art in each system—the contrast between (Western) modernism and (Eastern) socialist realism—seemed to offer proof for this. In the 1960s, however, not only did concepts of “art” and “culture” change, but the ways in which these concepts referred to politics also shifted. A new generation of artists, intellectuals, and cultural managers found ways to free themselves from the primacy of politics and demonstrated the transformative power of culture on society. This was a culture embodied by a new generation of youth, which broke free from hierarchies and the restraints of representation. Culture liberated itself from its aesthetically internalized labels, which in the case of modernism were supposed to prove the freedom of the Western individual, and, in the case of socialist realism, the superiority of a communist social order. But culture held itself within the parameters of international confrontation, which became explosive with the Vietnam War: national elites tended to understand culture (mostly in terms of high culture) as an alternative order to politics, an expression of human values set against the deadly manipulation of political hierarchies and monopolies.

This liberation also meant a liberation from a fixation on the dichotomy between high and mass culture that had predominated in the 1950s, a process that took on a special dynamic in the United States. The battles around civil rights and the Vietnam War in American society made extensive use of cultural expression, especially marshaling rock and pop music in the service of oppositional culture. Rejecting the difference between high culture and the market-oriented culture of light entertainment that was traditionally seen as lesser and lower, the student movement in America, with its growing counterculture, developed a cultural consciousness. It saw itself as an active way of life organized through a great variety of forms of aesthetic and emotional involvement. This became a worldwide model for opposition to established life-styles and power relations. It provided inspiration for new tactics in the struggle for minority rights and the equality of women.

In the 1970s many factors contributed to giving culture a key role in

the debates over democratization of societies that had become fossilized through decades of war and the cold war. In the United States these factors were strongly linked to the rejection of the political order and the whole military and industrial establishment during the Vietnam conflict. Interest in culture was more intense in the quarters of those pursuing oppositional life-styles, particularly the younger generation, which had begun seeking contact with Europe through film, travel, cuisine, and enthusiasm for art. In West Germany the reform policies of the coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals elected in 1969 provided significant impetus in democratizing culture. Here the interest in culture was more strongly channeled through initiatives on the state and community level and through new social groups. Despite talk of an “extended concept of culture” and the (slow) acceptance of intertwining its “high” and “popular” forms, culture in the European context retained more of its traditional representational function. While the young generation in Europe absorbed and extended American counterculture with much aplomb, one should not forget that it was due to the traditional notion of its high status that culture was able to become a liberating force on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The American Impact on the Communication Revolution

At the end of the 1970s the increasing dominance of the American media and communications industry became an important topic of contention in European and developing countries. The common denominator of international reactions, which were voiced above all in UNESCO, was resistance to American mass culture. On this basis—playing on well-established cultural anxieties vis-à-vis an invading giant—the omnipresence of American media lost its bonus as part of the fortification of the West in the cold war confrontations. Although the Vietnam War, sometimes called the “television war,” revealed the overextension of the United States as a global power, it did not diminish the American media industry’s dominance of the world market. On the contrary, it resulted in an even more outspoken determination of American political and business elites to use every possible means to ensure America’s media presence.² The aim was to guarantee the “free flow of information” through an internationally ratified information agreement that would allow the American communications and media industry access to all national domestic markets.³ American businesses dominated more than 80 percent of distribution and production in the

world communications market, as Zbigniew Brzezinski ascertained in his influential book *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*.⁴ This fact led to heated debates within UNESCO, with the third world countries and some European countries such as France becoming particularly agitated. In 1974 Finnish president Urho Kekkonen summed up the mood of the time: "Might it not be the case that the prophets who preach the unimpeded flow of information are not at all interested in equality between nations, but are simply on the side of power and wealth?"⁵

While the American debate on multiculturalism, which promotes greater sensitivity toward other cultures, was relegated to the sphere of education, the U.S. government made use of cold war rhetoric to enforce the opening up of the media markets of other nations for the American communications industry. They claimed that the state or the media in these countries were practicing a form of antidemocratic control. The great significance of these critiques of cultural or communications policy in the United States was revealed by the reaction of the American government in 1984 to UNESCO's refusal to comply with American demands. The United States promptly left the most important international cultural agency.

The French government organized an international effort against American cultural imperialism⁶ in France mainly over the question of economic control over film and television. Under President Mitterand this effort culminated in France's attempt to take a lead in Europe in the defense of national traditions of media culture and high culture. The central concept used was that of France's "cultural identity." While Minister for Culture Jack Lang linked this concept to the idea of "cultural democracy" at an international conference at the Sorbonne in 1983, Mitterand emphasized the economic dimension of promoting culture: "Investing in culture means investing in the economy. It frees the future and thus contributes to giving back to life its whole meaning."⁷ International cultural policy should "prevent market mechanisms and the economic power struggle from imposing stereotyped, culturally meaningless products on individuals of other nations," he argued.⁸ The participants agreed to complement the notion of cultural identity with that of cultural democracy, aware of the fact that cultural self-expression has great potential for economic gains or can, at times, compensate for insufficient economic gains. Yet, the core of the conflict over cultural identity with America was without doubt economic. By 1989 the states of the European Community alone were pay-

ing more than \$1 billion in licensing fees to American television companies. In the same year the American film industry had an export surplus of \$2.5 billion, second only to the aviation and space industry.⁹

Unlike France, the Federal Republic of Germany did not play a prominent or official role in this conflict. The cultural sovereignty of its *Länder*, or regional states, meant that a unified policy on such matters only came together in exceptional circumstances.¹⁰ Scholarly debates were still influenced by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry," but they rarely had access to the real workings of this industry, in which records, books, films, radio, television, the press, photography, reproduction of art and advertising, audiovisual products, and services were all competing with one another and were determined by international trends. The realization was slow in coming; it was no longer possible to view this problem in terms of the contrast between high and mass culture and thus to reduce the cultural presence of America to its dominance of the mass market. Those who worked in the industry knew that true access to the international communications market could only be gained by renouncing cultural sovereignty.

The 1980s became the crucial decade for a twofold readjustment of the redefined and broadened concept of culture, which, in the 1960s, had been extricated from the dichotomies of high and mass cultures. Both readjustments originated in the United States and were routinely attributed to this origin, often with open resentment of the intellectual elites against the constant influx of mass and popular culture. The first was, under the strong dominance of American music, movie, and media culture, the wide acceptance of the commercial conditions of cultural production, including those of high culture and art. The obligation to provide support for arts and culture, which European state institutions and cities had traditionally assumed and broadly extended in the 1970s and early 1980s, was increasingly questioned and put under financial scrutiny. By the 1990s, the established system of arts sponsorship—in Germany about 90 percent from public sources and 10 percent from private sources—was beginning to unravel. In the United States, where about 10 percent of outlays for arts and culture come from public sources and 90 percent from private sources, the few national agencies of public arts sponsorship such as the National Endowment for the Arts were almost shut down by the Republican Congress. Only heavy emphasis on the social usefulness of culture, which also informed the public commitment in European legislative bodies, saved public spon-

sorship on the national level. Demonstrating the economic benefits of arts and culture—both high and popular—for a city or region emerged as the most effective counterargument.

The other readjustment of the broadened concept of culture occurred under even stronger influence of the United States in the area of communication, where technological advances, especially the digital revolution, transformed the notions of time and space on a global scale. Communications technology reconstituted the relationship among economic, political, and cultural actors, absorbing functions and practices that traditionally had been considered to belong to the cultural realm. In his analysis of this process, Belgian communications scholar Armand Mattelart illuminates that both technological and nontechnological factors contributed to the readjustments of the 1980s that resulted in the realization that communication, long associated only with its technologies, would have to be considered part of culture:

Communication is also *culture*. Placing thought about communications under the sign of culture, however, was not a major concern of the theories and strategies of international communications in the course of their history, because of their technicist and economist drifts. It was only recently, in the 1980s, that the recentering on culture acquired its legitimacy, as centralized models of the management of culture in the welfare states entered into a crisis and as the world market became a space of transnational regulation of the relations between nations and peoples.¹¹

It is not surprising that Europeans were more resistant to recognizing communication as culture. The conservatives and Marxists, though separated by different social goals, found themselves to be companions in the offensive against American dominance in mass culture and communication. Traditionally part of conservative vocabulary, denigration of mass culture as an expression of low taste met with the attack against the commercialization of culture in the interest of American media conglomerates, which the Left had reformulated in the ideological battles of the 1960s. One of the most influential responses on the American side was already formulated in 1970 in *Between Two Ages*, in which Brzezinski projected the crucial role of the United States in disseminating the technetronic revolution. It would lead, Brzezinski conceded, to a “new imperialism” that, however, would soon be challenged and replaced, as the new communication practices would enable

other nations to compete and catch up. He described America's impact as disseminator of the technetronic revolution in this contradiction:

it both promotes and undermines American interests as defined by American policymakers; it helps to advance the cause of cooperation on a larger scale even as it disrupts existing social or economic fabrics; it both lays the groundwork for well-being and stability and enhances the forces working for instability and revolution.¹²

Brzezinski's projection of enormous advancements of global economic and social policies on the basis of the communication revolution and his insistence that the role of the United States as disseminator would not go unchallenged has held its ground for many years. His listing of stabilizing and destabilizing factors can be applied to the age of the Internet, as can the response on the Left that also "the new communication technologies are, in fact, the product and a defining feature of global capitalism that greatly enhances social inequality."¹³ What has become more concrete with the Internet is the potential of overriding "the antidemocratic implication of the media marketplace." Whether more democratic media and a more democratic political culture will ensue, however, is open to debate.¹⁴

Both adjustments of the extended concept of culture were anchored and monitored, as mentioned, in the realm of political economy, not in traditional humanities or liberal arts discussion. As a consequence it left academic and educational communities that engaged in cultural studies as a new heuristic and theoretical device in a precarious position of entrenchment. It is no coincidence that the adversarial promotion of culture as a manifestation of diversity took shape in the 1980s, most prominently and polemically in the academic world, which found it a convenient vehicle for renewing the tradition of cultural pluralism as part of the democratic ideal. The contest between cultural conformity, intensified by the growth of mass culture and communication, and cultural diversity, enhanced by the academic yearning for distinction and *différence*, absorbed a great deal of critical energy. Eventually it became the terrain in which multiculturalism shifted the frame of reference away from the Eurocentric basis of American education toward the concept of culture as a vehicle of personal, ethnic, or racial identity.¹⁵ The so-called cultural wars of the 1980s that were fought over the definition of American identity either from the traditional consensus position or from the multicultural fabric of the country made this terrain part of the confrontations, as it reflected America's close ties to the cultures of

Europe. These ties, weakened by the end of the cold war, were seriously threatened both by technoculturalism and multiculturalism.¹⁶

It has been called a great irony that “America’s belated attention to its multicultural makeup . . . occurred just when the electronic media and technology are perfecting our ability to obliterate diversity.”¹⁷ Upon closer look, the connection is less ironic than causal. The fact that multiculturalism became the focal point of the American democratic agenda should not obliterate this dialectic. Europeans did not overlook the connection, although they found the American model of multiculturalism appealing especially at a time when ethnic clashes in the Balkans triggered the worst atrocities since World War II. With the debate about globalization, the arguments about obliterating cultural diversity have again turned against the United States although globalization has been increasingly conceptualized under the decentering omnipresence of the Internet, not only under the principles of corporate expansionism.

Among the many irritations that surface in the transatlantic quarrels about directing globalization, one question clearly reflects the recent shifts in the conceptualization of culture: whether Europe still participates in defining universalism as culture’s mission, of which it was the guardian for centuries, or whether it has shifted to enforcing culture in its resistance potential against economic globalization. Slavoj Žižek has formulated it for the case of France, always the most alert critic of American hegemony:

The paradox is that the proper roles seem to be reversed: France, in its republican universalism, is more and more perceived as a *particular* phenomenon threatened by the process of globalization, while the United States, with its multitude of groups demanding recognition of their particular, specific identities, more and more emerges as the universal model.¹⁸

And yet France is only part of the emerging Europe. What is threatened by globalization is not the particularity of a region or culture but “universality itself, in its eminently political dimension.”¹⁹ As Europe increasingly tries to unite nationalities and not just ethnic cultures, the search for an universalism beyond the economic and technological agenda becomes crucial. The ability to integrate socially determined goals into international politics will determine the success, as will the ability to reshape the concept of culture and to activate its prospective and anticipatory qualities.

Communication as Culture

With the end of the cold war and the integration of Europe, the discourse on the European-American relationship in the area of communication has been transformed. The arguments of political and economic dependencies have lost their urgency as the predominance of politics in the public sphere has diminished and as economic globalization is drawing attention away from national models. Most obvious is the emergence of a new media order in Europe, which is supposed to promote integration and cohesion, while Japanese, British, Australian, and German companies have taken over parts of the American publication and media industries.

One can argue that the transformations of the nature of both the broadcast media and the public sphere that occurred in the 1990s have been even more fundamental to culture than those of the 1980s. As long as the cold war endorsed the political and moral weight of culture vis-à-vis the military and political stalemate, the traditional association with the status of high culture provided public interest and representational functions even for the most commercial ventures in film, television, and other visual media. Yet the erosion of the differences between high and popular culture, already far advanced in the 1980s, intensified in the 1990s, when the antiuniversalistic aesthetic currents that had been elevated under the sign of postmodernism converged in an all-encompassing commercial universalism. If every item of everyday life becomes part of the ever-expanding aestheticism of our consumerist existence, art and culture lose whatever distinction they bestow on their audience. Their prominence in producing identity is being successfully challenged by other constituents of contemporary life, especially those that help us function as subjects in the aesthetic consumerism and absorbing communication experience of today. Consumption itself has transformed from mere use—the “realization” of the product—to communication, and the consuming-communicating subject itself is becoming “creative.” “The fact that immaterial labor simultaneously produces subjectivity and economic value shows how the capitalist mode of production has penetrated our life and torn down established distinctions between economy, power, culture, and knowledge.”²⁰

Under these auspices communication has indeed become culture, providing identity through a kind of consumerist creativity that even Joseph Beuys, the propagator of the aesthetization of everyday life, might not have recognized as such in the 1970s. At the same time the

devalorization of reality has been intensified by the media and the Internet. The disorientation of the public has resulted in inhibiting its access to political consciousness. The “very ideal of public opinion” is being undermined, “the belief that public knowledge can, and should, inform and shape political life.”²¹ Recognizing the “force of the image that now prevails,” Ignacio Ramonet assesses the culturalist dilemma: “the objective is not to make us understand a situation, but to make us take part in an event.” This occurs, he adds, at an enormous social cost: “Becoming informed is tiring, but this is the price of democracy.”²² While functioning more as a catalyst of identity than ever, communication as a mode of existence dissipates its long-standing public mission of facilitating informed understanding of the political process. (Often quoted as a powerful example is the talk show as the conduit to political information and electoral behavior.)

Europeans have been more forthcoming with the warning that this means a decline of civic and political culture.²³ The American doctrine of the free flow of information through commercial channels has clearly contributed to dislodging the European public service broadcasting, but it remains to be seen whether the new European media order can check the privatization and commercialization of all public communication, thus preventing public information from fully turning into a mere vehicle for advertising.

All in all, it should have become obvious that the communication revolution, which drew its dynamic from American business interests, has impacted greatly not only the transformation of concept and practice of culture in the late twentieth century, leading from a mixing of high and popular culture to a merging of many of their functions in society, but also the nature and function of communication itself. While it is still too early to ascertain the full consequences of the fact that communication *is* culture by generating identity in a new matrix of consumption and production—which projects itself on both national and international markets and politics—it is not too early to show that the transformations have gained momentum that places them beyond the traditional notions of “America” and “Americanization.” Whether they are truly global remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive overview, see Frank Trommler, “Neuer Start und alte Vorurteile. Die Kulturbeziehungen im Zeichen des Kalten Krieges 1945–1968,” in

Die USA und Deutschland im Zeitalter des Kalten Krieges: Ein Handbuch, ed. Detlev Junker (Stuttgart/Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 1:567–91; and “Kultur als transatlantisches Spannungsfeld 1968–1990,” in *Die USA und Deutschland im Zeitalter*, 2:395–419.

2. Anthony Smith, *The Geopolitics of Information: How Western Culture Dominates the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 58.

3. Emily S. Rosenberg, “Cultural Interactions,” in *Encyclopedia of the United States in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley I. Kutler et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1996), 2:710.

4. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America’s Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

5. Cited in Jörg Becker et al., eds., *Informationstechnologie und internationale Politik* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1983), 13.

6. John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

7. Cited in Chantal Cinquin, “President Mitterand Also Watches Dallas: American Mass Media and French National Policy,” in *The Americanization of the Global Village*, ed. Roger Rollin (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 21.

8. *Ibid.*, 19.

9. Marie-Luise Hauch-Fleck, “Die Rollen werden neu verteilt: Europäische Produzenten wehren sich gegen die Vormachtstellung der Amerikaner,” *Die Zeit* (overseas ed.), May 25, 1990, 10.

10. Klaus von Bismarck et al., *Industrialisierung des Bewußtseins: Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den “neuen” Medien* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1985), esp. 189–90.

11. Armand Mattelart, *Mapping World Communication: War, Progress, Culture* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xv.

12. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages*, 34.

13. Robert W. McChesney, “The Internet and United States Communication Policy-Making in Historical and Critical Perspective,” *Journal of Communication* 46 (1996): 99.

14. *Ibid.*

15. David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 100.

16. Stephen Langley, “Multiculturalism versus Technoculturalism: Its Challenge to American Theatre and the Functions of Arts Management,” in *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present*, ed. Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 278–89.

17. *Ibid.*, 279.

18. Slavoj Žižek, “A Leftist’s Plea for Eurocentrism,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 1007.

19. *Ibid.*, 1008.

20. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, “Die Kunst von heute braucht kein Haus:

Warum das Museum seine gesellschaftliche Funktion verloren hat," *Die Zeit* 13 (March 25, 1999): 55.

21. Kevin Robins, "The Politics of Silence: The Meaning of Community and the Uses of Media in the New Europe," *New Formations* 21 (1994): 99.

22. Ignacio Ramonet, "L'Ère du Soupçon," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (May 1991): 12, 99.

23. Jay G. Blumler, "Political Communication Systems All Change: A Response to Kees Brants," *European Journal of Communication* 14 (1999): 245–46.