CHAPTER 11

# Global Media, Cultural Change and the Transformation of the Local: The Contribution of Cultural Studies to a Sociology of Hybrid Formations

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*To the memory of Karl Hornung (1903–1971)*

The US-dominated mass culture is mainly viewed in a negative light. From time to time, it is even damned apocalyptically as one of the principal threats to modern society. Looking at it in this way, mass culture can cause conformity, passivity, political apathy, racism and violence. The globalization of products, coming primarily from the USA, is said to bring about the creation of a standardized and stereotyped culture by spreading the same ideas and myths across the world. This is emphasized by the process within the culture industry of focusing on American lifestyles, which are offered as a model for self-presentation to the entire world. Beyond this, it is said that the worldwide diffusion of mass culture is destroying the uniqueness of regional cultures. As far as Europe is concerned, according to Stefan Müller-Doohm in his overview of this pessimistic evaluation, this is destroying the broad base of the European culture of Enlightenment, whose place is being taken by the internationally standardized mass production of popular culture (Müller-Doohm 1993: 593ff).

New theoretical works and empirical investigations contradict this understanding of popular culture as mass culture, which was largely marked by a nostalgic understanding of the modern age. My thesis is that the current global media culture cannot be adequately understood within this negative framework. It loses sight of the dynamism, differentiation and pluralization of popular culture spread by the media as well as the practices and productivity of the consumers. Recent works emphasize that global culture is not simply a standardized culture across the world (cf. Featherstone 1995; Kellner 1995; Winter 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Lull 2001). They point out that consumption





of media products often leads to the opposite of this standardization. In the following, I would like to show, using a cultural studies approach, how the reception and appropriation of global media products in various local contexts is shaped by difference, syncretism and hybridity.

## *Rambo* and the Ideology of 'Global America'

When the globetrotter and writer Paul Theroux (1992) visited the Solomon Islands, he found that Rambo was a folk hero on one of the islands and that even isolated villagers used a generator to power a video recorder to show the films. Even in Burma and in many other parts of South and East Asia, Rambo has become a popular figure (cf. Iyer 1989). At first sight, these examples could be corroboration that the global cultural industry is homogenizing culture in the South. This suggests that if *Rambo* is an imperialistic text representing the values and ideologies of American capitalism, it leads, like Coca-Cola, Donald Duck or *Dallas*, to the American way of life becoming the standard throughout the world. Through the circulation and availability of media, local cultures will, according to this argument, be levelled by consumer products and advertising and consumers manipulated. In this interpretation, the globalization process leads by and large to a stereotyped, common world culture.

Strong objections have been raised in recent years to this theory of cultural imperialism. The main criticism is that the actual reception of a product has too quickly been judged by an analysis of its content alone. This means that there has been no investigation into how consumer goods and media are actually received and appropriated in everyday contexts (cf. Thompson 1990; Winter 1995). First, Rambo, a manly hero who defeats countless enemies and overcomes all sorts of dangers, is naturally a figure who is attractive in many cultures. However, are the interpretations in Burma, the Solomon Islands, Illinois or Munich really the same? In the framework of cultural studies, we learned from early on to investigate various local reception processes more thoroughly. The American anthropologist Eric Michaels (1991) stated that Rambo is very popular, even among tribal Aborigines in the deserts of Central Australia. They see him as a Third World hero, defeating the white officer class. This reflects their own negative experience of the 'whites' in Australia, in particular those in authority. Moreover, they suppose that Rambo holds tribal or kinship relations with the prisoners he frees in Vietnam. In contrast, in the USA (for example in the case of former president Ronald Reagan) Rambo was viewed as an individualistic lone soldier with nationalistic inclinations, fighting for what is right. The Aborigines, in their analysis of the media text, find interpretations that are appropriate to their own experience as subordinate

population groups. For them, Rambo becomes a figure with whom to identify, a figure that asserts itself to represent them in ethnic conflicts.

In John Fiske's (1989) analysis, the Aboriginal versions resist by contradicting the hegemonic interpretations suggested in the text. The Aborigines' social standing in Australian society leads to a productive reinterpretation of Hollywood texts. In a certain way, they create their own opposition culture in their enthusiastic reception of Rambo. Hence, Michaels' and Fiske's descriptions should not be misunderstood as depicting the standard form of reception. Not every appropriation of global products in the South acts as resistance or opposition. These options are more suitably termed 'moments of freedom', as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian (1998) wrote in his examination of popular culture in Africa. Marginalized and suppressed groups can use cultural resources to create meaning, form identity and develop their own interpretations. In the following, I would like to broaden this perspective, looking at the example of the reception of American media products. I will discuss various culturally shaped forms of interpretation and consumption in which popular culture is expressed as difference, resistance and hybridity. Finally, I will show how these processes can be interpreted within the cultural studies framework.

## Difference, Syncretism and Hybridity in Media Reception

Daniel Miller (1994) made an interesting study of the example of the reception of *The Young and the Restless* in Trinidad. In it, he shows how a media product disseminated worldwide is interpreted in the South. His analysis clearly indicates that this process is misunderstood if it is only viewed as the exporting and consumption of American culture. He is able to show how the soap opera is subjected to a localization process where it is integrated into local practices and interpretations, into 'the world of gossip, scandal and confusion that generates the constant narrative structure of community life ... the soap opera is not just Trinidadian, but, as in a popular local expression "True True Trini"' (Miller 1994: 253). The reception of *The Young and the Restless* is a community activity like telenovelas in Brazil or Portugal. The viewers create a relationship between the series and everyday life, for example, by talking about the programme, in particular gossiping about sexual relations and incidents in the series. The scandals find great resonance because in the popular culture of Trinidad there is the idea that 'truth' can be brought to light through scandalous exposure. Viewers are also interested in clothes and fashion in the series, and discuss this intensively. This provides a direction for their own self-presentation. Miller attributes this to the fact that public image is very important in Trinidad for the formation and preservation of personal identity. His study





clearly shows, therefore, that it is not enough to analyse the formal characteristics of media texts. It is just as important to investigate the local reception processes, which cannot be predicted beforehand, and are contingently and contextually specific. A similar interpretation applies to *Dallas*.

For many critics, *Dallas* was a synonym for cultural imperialism in the 1980s (cf. Tomlinson 1991: 45ff.). While the Texan soap opera enjoyed worldwide popularity, many cultural critics responded with hostility to its success. The ostentatious presentation of riches and luxury, the expensive clothes and automobiles, the plush apartments and so forth, were interpreted as having strong ideological meaning. The critics did not, however, examine how the programme was actually received. In an early study of reception, Ien Ang (1985) was able to show that enjoying *Dallas* is a complex phenomenon which cannot be reduced to the ideological power of the scripts. She found that many of the female viewers she interviewed, among them one committed feminist, enjoyed the emotional realism seen primarily in the depiction of personal conflict. On the other hand, these viewers considered *Dallas* to be unrealistic in its representation of American society. Furthermore, Ang reached the conclusion that some of the female viewers even saw the series in the context of a tragic, melodramatic emotional structure which was not so much present in the script but rather in their own female experiences. The cultural ability to place oneself within a melodramatic fantasy is shaped particularly by women who, in the course of their lives, have had to interpret events and situations psychologically and to cope emotionally. According to Ang (1985), these fantasy strategies arise from a vague, unarticulated dissatisfaction with personal existence and are an attempt to give meaning to everyday life. The example shows that there is room to play with meaning and to enjoy popular entertainment products which viewers can actively use to express their own perspectives and to fulfil their needs.

Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz came to similar conclusions in their study, *The Export of Meaning* (1993), in which they examined the reception of *Dallas* in a variety of national and ethnic contexts. They expressed initial scepticism about theorists of cultural imperialism who attempt to deduce the effects of television programmes based on content analysis. The purpose of their comprehensive study was an empirical examination of this theory from the position of the viewer. They began with the fact that watching television is not an isolated activity but that social interaction, such as conversations with others, is an essential part of the interpretation and assessment processes, especially when the television programme comes from another culture. The study is based on group discussions following a standardized set of guidelines which, alongside a questionnaire, were carried out after participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds had each watched an episode of *Dallas*. The various groups

were constructed in such a way that they all had a similar class background ('lower middle class with high school education or less'), but were all from different ethnic backgrounds. Each group itself, however, was 'ethnically homogeneous': 'Accordingly, we assembled small groups of family and friends, each group consisting of three married couples of like age, education, and ethnicity. Forty-four such groups were chosen from among Israeli Arabs, newly arrived Russian Jews, veteran Moroccan settlers, and members of kibbutzim (typically second-generation Israelis)' (Liebes and Katz 1993: 6).

The interpretations by these groups were compared with those of American viewers in Los Angeles and Japanese viewers who had been most critical in viewing *Dallas*. The complex conclusions of this study cannot be comprehensively presented here. Of particular interest in our context are the divergent interpretations, already evident in the discussion of the episode's content. These interpretations were governed by the viewers' cultural background. For instance, an Arab group arrived at the following 'misreading'. In one episode, Sue Ellen left her husband, J.R., with her baby and fled to the house of her former lover and his father. The Arab group convinced one another in their discussion that the correct interpretation was that she had left her husband to live in the house of *her own father*. Katz and Liebes showed that the ethnic groups criticized the values within the programme in terms of their own cultural background. The Arab groups rejected the Western decadence, which in their opinion was manifest in the series in broken family structures, sexual immorality and the display of riches and luxury. Some of the Russian groups even developed conspiracy theories, believing that the producers were intentionally depicting a distorted reality to influence the viewer. The Americans, the kibbutzniks and the Japanese were also partly critical, but more often of the programme's aesthetics and the producer's competence.

The results of Liebes' and Katz's study show that the reception and appropriation of global media products are an active social process. Even regular viewers have the ability to regard American media in a complex and productive way. Their cultural background is not simply suppressed, but rather is often the basis for critical analysis of *Dallas*. They do not let themselves be so easily and completely manipulated as many critics believe, suggesting that the theory of cultural imperialism is, in many ways, a polemical exaggeration. A cultural sociological analysis must not be satisfied with an analysis of media texts or the strategies of the entertainment industry, important as these are. The task is to show how people react within local contexts to the strategies of the culture industry. This is illustrated, for example, by the current debate over the marketing by the American firm Warner Brothers of the Harry Potter character created by Scottish author, J.K. Rowling. Warner Brothers is trying for commercial





reasons to enforce a worldwide, standardized image of Harry, but its efforts are being undermined and obstructed by the tactics of fans who have made Harry Potter their own by means of lovingly created homepages, translations, parties and so forth.

The next example I would like to examine in more detail comes from the field of popular music. In the American ghettos, primarily the Bronx, hip hop arose in the 1970s and 1980s. This, like earlier forms of Afro-American music culture, expressed the experience of humiliating living conditions, oppression, racism and struggle. At the same time, hip hop was a synonym for productivity and creativity, emanating from poverty, deprivation and need (cf. Rose 1994). Twenty years on, however, hip hop has become a global product spread by the American culture industry. Does the globalization linked to this lead to a trivializing of hip hop? Does it, as a part of the media 'white noise', become an empty symbol which has lost its original significance and its strength as a collective form of self-expression by marginal groups? Or can the underlying characteristics – such as those of young people tackling social problems and their position in life – be expressed in form and practice if they are usurped by local contexts and loaded with meaning from them? I would now like to examine these questions in the light of ethnographic research I have carried out. To do this, I will first look at some characteristic features of hip hop.

The hip hop culture (consisting of a variety of forms of cultural expression such as rap music, breakdance, graffiti, the DJ club scene, b-boy and wild-style fashions) first found success as performance art at rap parties and on the club scene before becoming popularized by records, CDs, music videos, a regular programme on MTV and films such as *Wild Style*. At its core is rap, rhythmical speech set against a musical background, which, from a drumbeat to a collage of riffs, can consist of drum breaks and diverse songs. The background music is produced in discos or clubs by using turntables. DJs produce a soundtrack on record players by choosing and combining parts of previously recorded songs. This basic technique of appropriating music (or musical history) is essentially refined by two technical acts, namely scratching and punch phrasing, techniques by which sounds of various turntables are overlaid or mixed. As Richard Shusterman (1992) has shown, rap deconstructs the traditional idea of originality and uniqueness because of these self-reflexive processes of usurpation. In this popular art form, there is no longer anything original but only the usurpation of other usurpations. This is because every DJ borrows from other sources. Recycling of 'tradition' and rearrangement can lead to complete transformation. They can be viewed as 'tactics of the weak', as defined by Michel de Certeau (1984), and can undermine the division between the artist

and the audience, producing something personal from those resources provided by the culture industry.

The reworking of existing compositions is supplemented by rap lyrics, which are often critical, giving a voice to social reality and the problems of the ghetto inhabitants and of other fringe groups. Such issues include unemployment, prostitution, violence or drug addiction. Many rap songs stand out because of clever and witty colloquial expressions, including the use of mottoes and clichés, gaining new significance in the rap context because of multiple levels of meaning, making them complex, polysemous texts. They outline alternative interpretations of social events and offer counselling, giving moral accounts of sexuality, drugs or alienation. Studies to date show that rap music can take on an important function for cultural and social identity (cf. Dimitriadis 2001). Therefore, hip hop leads to the construction of Afro-American identity first at a local level in the ghetto, a process also shaped by rivalry. There is also national rivalry, for instance between Los Angeles and New York rappers. Due to media circulation and the marketing of resistance by the record industry (cf. Dyson 1996), these identity models become globally significant.

The results of my ethnographic investigation, carried out mainly in Aachen, Cologne and Trier, show that the majority of interviewed hip hoppers use this musical style to define their own personal identity and, hence, for individualization. Hip hop for them is primarily an arrangement of consumer merchandise, consisting of CDs, XXL clothing, baseball caps, trainers, chains, and so on. At the outset, the use of these has no subversive or resistance connotations, apart from their perceived role of dissociation from adult culture. Hip hop is instead used to create an identity because it differs from mainstream youth tastes. This is clearly revealed in the reception of music focusing on beat and groove. Lyrics are only of minor importance to this scene, rarely gaining great attention. It is not the content of rap music that is decisive but the sounds. Therefore, rap in English is often more popular than rap in German because it flows better. The different fans, mainly coming to the scene through friends, know a lot about the history of hip hop. Most of those performers I interviewed first listened to hip hop in the mid-1980s and have remained loyal ever since. Accounts of the history of the music are often used to reconstruct their own past and that of their circle of friends. Marco describes community experience generated by the hip hop feeling in the following way:

> Not feeling alone, living hip hop, celebrating hip hop with other hip hoppers, with other mates. You know, like at a jam together, even though you don't know each other, you feel like you're in the group somehow. You just feel like you belong. (Extract from interview)





The group experience is defined as having fun together. It creates affective conditions for like-minded aesthetic communities to construct and confirm their own identity. Moreover, some recipients become active themselves, as Andy did:

> Actually, at first this began with paint spraying and then somewhere I heard hip hop, like *Public Enemy* and stuff and there was already trouble brewing. I heard it again and again and thought it's boring spraying day after day and in the evening, you've to do something about that, yeah, I thought, bought a mixing table, two record players, yeah and then it really got started with hip hop, scratching and stuff. (Extract from interview)

My results led to the conclusion that appropriation takes place in three phases. First is the reception of consumer products disseminated by music and the purchase of global merchandise. Most hip hoppers remain at this stage. In the second phase, the creative practices of the Afro-Americans using records are taken over as models. These are transformed through personal performance as a DJ and then creatively developed further. Almost all those interviewed distanced themselves from the ghetto feeling of the music. The appropriation process gains a reflexive character in the third phase, through examination of one's own life and social problems and through personal rap lyrics. For instance, the lyrics of an Aachen rap group deal with racism and alcoholism whose spread among young people is attributed to their circumstances, unemployment and lack of hope. The rappers relate their normal, concrete life, their wishes, hopes, hurts and suffering in their songs. Through this, they voice their own views, analyse their reality and become, according to de Certeau (1984), 'poets of their own affairs'. Thus, these young people even prefer to rap in German because in their opinion this provides a more authentic account of their own everyday life with its predicaments large and small.

Thus, my ethnographic study of the scene shows that hip hop, using music, group rituals and performances by DJs and rap singers, creates a community, providing identity and social cohesion. However, in the case of those I interviewed, hip hop did not emerge from everyday practices as it did in the ghettos in the USA. Rather, it was initially received as a global consumer product, and its identity models were taken over. Only a fraction of the hip hoppers then try to use it as a cultural resource to voice their own experiences and their own views. The significance of hip hop, like other popular texts, alternates between commercial trivializing and creative reinterpretation. The global marketing of an American product is confronted with local forms of appropriation. On the one hand, hip hoppers use hip hop for individualization, and on the other hand, they use it to create a community and sensibility that approach hip hop's original meaning and purpose.

In this context, the reception of rap in Africa is also interesting. In the early 1990s, rap was fashionable and mostly restricted to the better-off young people who could afford the latest consumer products from the USA. Today, however, it is popular among young people from a variety of social backgrounds (Servant 2000). Musicians from different African countries combine rap with their local traditions, practices and various languages. In the crossover, new arrangements arise from traditional and electronic music. The success of African rap even led to a renaissance of African music. Dakar, the new world capital of rap, is said to have about 2,000 rap groups, who were inspired by the urban Afro-American culture and who have made rap their lifestyle. The lyrics of African artists depict the bitter reality of their world, including poverty, environmental destruction, ethnic conflicts, AIDS and so on. Thus their productive examination of rap lends a popular foundation to their social criticism.

In addition, the music ethnologist George Lipsitz concludes in his study, *Dangerous Crossroads* that '[hip hop] expresses a form of politics perfectly suited to the post-colonial era. It brings a community into being through performance, and it maps out real and imagined relations between people that speak to the realities of displacement, disillusion, and despair created by the austerity economy of post-industrial capitalism' (Lipsitz 1994: 36). Moreover, Lipsitz shows that there are still more 'tactics of the weak' in the realm of popular music. For example, ethnic minority immigrants in big cities negotiate their identity by making music, combining their own cultural experiences with forms of global mainstream culture, which they change into a cultural resource. The examples that he gives of these inter-ethnic musical re-creations are Puerto Rican boogaloo in New York, Algerian rai in Paris, Chicano punk in Los Angeles, Aboriginal rock in Australia and swamp pop in New Orleans and Houston. Lipsitz takes these examples to show how musicians from oppressed minorities express their ethnic differences by using, and at the same time enjoying, mainstream music. One of the tactics, in Michel de Certeau's (1984) terminology, is anti-essentialism. This is an attempt by individuals and groups to construct, in a limited time-frame, a united front to defend common interest, feelings and needs. This is done by repelling any heterogeneous features. This commonality is not voiced directly, but rather is disguised or uses another medium. For example, in the late 1980s Maoris in New Zealand began to identify with Afro-American popular culture. They usurped Afro-American styles of self-depiction and the slang associated with them. What a superficial examination criticized as the success of American cultural imperialism and the destruction of local traditions, the Maoris themselves believed was a veiled effort to voice their own marginalized and lost position in the homeland, using Afro-American elements.





For Lipsitz, this tactical anti-essentialism[1] is the key to understanding the various inter-ethnic music juxtapositions. He writes:

> The key to understanding each of these groups is to see how they can become 'more themselves' by appearing to be something other than themselves. Like many members of aggrieved populations around the world, these strategic [*tactical*] anti-essentialists have become experts in disguise because their survival has often depended on it. (Lipsitz 1994: 63)

However, this treatment of music is just one empirical example of a creative everyday practice under global conditions. Theatrical productions also gain central significance. These are important both for identity formation and for community constitution. Performance politics can be interpreted as an answer of 'the weak' to social tension and difficult circumstances. A new and important task for research is therefore to examine how new identities and unforeseen links and alliances are created in the use of global media products rather than searching for cultural origins or foundations. For example, this can be examined from the perspective of diaspora. Related examples show that hybrid cultural forms arise that can result in an alternative public sphere. Difference is expressed from a marginal position and must be constantly renegotiated. Paul Gilroy states that '[the] seemingly trivial forms of youth sub-culture point to the opening up of a self-consciously post-colonial space in which the affirmation of difference points forward to a more pluralistic conception of nationality and perhaps beyond that to its transcendence' (Gilroy 1993: 62).

The public sphere transfiguration caused by globalization and migration provides opportunities to form personal lifestyles and cultural identity. As Homi Bhabha (1994) shows, these processes break up unambiguous cultural identity, revealing discursive constructs, ambivalence and ambiguity. In the gaps newly formed by cultural displacement and social discrimination, tactics can be developed to form communities and identities. These are no longer based on essence but on ambivalence and hybridity. In this field of cultural liminality, residual and newly arisen practices, according to Raymond Williams (1980) are discovered and expressed. Stuart Hall also seeks a new definition of the concept of ethnicity. This is no longer associated with nation and 'race'. The fact that we all have ethnic roots and speak from an ethnic position must not repress the reality of other ethnic groups forced out, dispossessed or excluded from representation (Hall 1992). Instead, the new ethnic politics must begin from the point of difference. In the case of identity politics, this

1 Lipsitz uses the phrase 'strategic anti-essentialism', following a study by Gayatri Spivak (1993). However, after de Certeau and Fiske (1989), it seems to be more accurate to refer to 'tactical anti-essentialism'.

means that essential and universal structures of identity must be surrendered and replaced with the concrete, non-essential and non-universal experience of the weak (Anzaldúa 1988). Room for cultural exchange must be thought of as a process, as Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it (1991), in which difference and identity are continually redefined and expressed. The question arises as to what consequences the development of 'new' collective identities will have. Roland Robertson (1992) shows in his studies on globalization that this process began at the latest in the early fifteenth century and is closely linked to the modernization process. Over the last twenty years there have been many signs that a qualitative leap has occurred, developed through a coincidence of migration and the globalization of electronic media. The flow of images spread by the media and the flow of people occur simultaneously and produce a 'public sphere Diaspora' (Appadurai 1996), but one in which individuals partake of more than just the products of the American culture industry. Japanese in San Francisco borrow Japanese films in their quarter, an Afghan taxi-driver in Chicago listens to religious cassettes from his homeland, Punjabis in London or Turks in Germany watch videos from their countries (Gillespie 1993). In Nigeria, a real boom in local videos has occurred (Servant 2001). Since 1997, 1,080 video productions were approved by the Nigerian Censor Board. At least 300,000 copies might be made of a successful film. Nigerian videos are increasingly seen in other African countries and also in the USA. About three million people make up the Nigerian diaspora in the USA. In New Orleans, the American rapper Master P. produced his own videos based on the model of the Nigerian dream factory and these are very popular in the American ghettos.

In contrast to modernization theorists' accepted belief, religion is not disappearing in the globalization process, since it is not shaped in essence by Western cultural imperialism. The ethnologist Appadurai writes: 'There is growing evidence that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency' (Appadurai 1996: 7). Moreover, the media create possible 'emotional communities' (Maffesoli 1988; Grossberg 1997), specialized cultures (Winter and Eckert 1990; Winter 1999) and affective demonstrations of solidarity:

> Collective experiences of the mass media, especially film and video, can create solidarities of worship and charisma, such as those that formed regionally around the Indian female deity Santoshi Ma in the seventies and eighties and transnationally around Ayatollah Khomeini in roughly the same period. Similar solidarities can form around sport and internationalism, as the transnational effects of the Olympics so clearly show. Tenements and buildings house video clubs in places like Kathmandu and Bombay. Fan clubs and political followings emerge from small-town media cultures, as in South India. (Appadurai 1996: 8)





Individuals and groups relate global flows to their everyday practices in the field of the imagination. This deserves a central role alongside the affective dimension. Shared imaginations are the prerequisites of transnational, collective behaviour. At the same time, they depend on the dynamic of the prevailing context, whether it is one that leads to new religiousness, to power or to greater social justice. Appadurai's approach also provides the opportunity to heighten the problems of 'global America'. If we do not identify America with the physical territory of the USA but see it as a global imagery, we can understand that there can also be a desire for the 'American style' within the context of local opposition. The global media, with their images of consumer products and lifestyles, create an imaginary geography which makes being in America or becoming American an ideal and a utopia. Hollywood films, soaps and adverts for Coca-Cola, Nike or McDonald's promise cosmopolitan and global alternatives to the locally available identities. Therefore, the appropriation of media can lead to a reflexive expression of cultural difference which contrasts real opportunities with imaginary ones. In order adequately to understand globalization, it is important to investigate the local contexts of reception and appropriation of media products. For instance, Ien Ang has argued for a radical contextualism modulated by ethnographic research. Only in this way can the locally based practices bound by contexts be understood. These are the practices by which television and other media are used in everyday life: 'The understanding emerging from this kind of inquiry favours interpretative particularisation over explanatory generalisation, historical and local concreteness rather than formal abstraction, "thick" description of details rather than extensive but "thin" survey' (Ang 1996: 71).

In conclusion, I would like to summarize what these cultural studies perspectives mean for research into the globalization processes.

## Incorporating Differences and Radical Vagueness into the Global Postmodern Era

The discussion up to this point has shown that the power of the global must not be exaggerated. Global media products are of course locally re-expressed. This leads to processes of de-territorialization, syncretization and hybridization (cf. Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Chambers and Curti 1996; Lull 2000). Symbols, signs and ideologies are singled out of their original contexts and gain a new meaning by mixing with other cultural elements as, along with Lipsitz (1994),

Rowe and Schelling (1991) show in their study of popular culture in Latin America. For example, rap in Latin America is linked by artists with salsa, reggae and pop. Symbolic forms and their meanings are therefore continually subject to change. Throughout the world, people create their own versions of geographically distant cultures, as Tony Mitchell (1996) also highlights. This shows that globalization always implies processes of re-territorialization. Through productive and creative use of global resources, culture continually reconstitutes itself.

Thus Stuart Hall (1991) is right to describe the present globalization as a structure that is simultaneously global and local. The global flows of signs, information and images do not produce a standardized culture. The new culture, which Hall calls the global postmodern era, does not speak a single language and is not shaped by one dominant ideology, but rather is determined by difference and plurality. This culture is already characteristically a hybrid culture.[2] Now this must not lead us to exaggerate the power of the local and so think that the South could win the battle against the global postmodern era coming from the North. Hall even voices the supposition that a new form of homogenization is emerging through global commercialization processes. These would no longer try to overcome differences but would rather try to demand and incorporate differences. Therefore, it is appropriate to show scepticism towards over-optimistic judgements. However, here Hall is thinking – like the imperialist theorists – from the global point of view. If we turn to the side of the locals, a somewhat different picture arises.

With this in mind, it is even possible to see in the USA a rearticulation of the local in the form of a 'new regionalism' which is directed against cultural homogenization (Ostwald 2001). For example, the Lobsterburger in Maine, the vegetarian Californiaburger in San Francisco or the highly spiced Cajun catfish in New Orleans are set against the burgers of McDonald's. The trend towards cultural standardization is also undermined by the fact that the acceptance and popularity of TV shows and musical trends are regionally different.[3] The American entertainment industry must now be aware of regional peculiarities and local preferences in its own country. Given the waning – due to the progress of the globalization process – of state borders and national identity,

2 Admittedly, Renato Rosaldo (1989) has shown that every culture actually has a hybrid character. In his interpretation, hybridity reveals the fundamental experiences of earliest cultural encounters and contacts. James Clifford also argues along these lines in *Routes* (1997).

3 Ostwald (2001: 33) writes: 'The media market researcher, Sandra Kess, says that programmes with a certain degree of "edginess", such as detective series *Law and Order*, which was enormously popular in the North, would be rejected in the "Bible Belt", the religious South of the USA. In contrast, the series *Touched by an Angel* has its highest viewing ratings in the country in this area'. Even MTV reveals the trend towards local musical tastes.





consumers (re-)discover regional differences in history, customs, practices and identity.

The global postmodern era is marked by erosion and the diminishing significance of the nation state. Because this is not determined by cultural coherence, the global village is shaped by a 'realm of uncertainty', as confirmed by Ien Ang (1994). Thus, diverging subversive or reflexive uses and interpretations that are developed in cultural contexts are, on one hand, an expression of consumer freedom, and – even if it is restricted – an expression of individuality (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). On the other hand, however, as the examples discussed above show, these uses and interpretations can be seen as contingent creations of meaning in a dynamic, conflict-rich and contradictory everyday life which is shaped by globalization. The global flows of signs, images and information (Lash and Urry 1994; Lash 2002) face a heterogeneous, unruly and uncontrollable game of difference within social practice. What meaning they acquire, how the global is expressed with the local, cannot be determined in the beginning. There are no firm structures of meanings; moreover, symbolic messages are arranged polysemously. In everyday communication processes which vary locally, culture is continually reconstituted in more or less hybrid forms. A cultural sociological analysis aimed at understanding the logic of power relationships in the global postmodern era must face this radical uncertainty of communication; it must acknowledge the breadth of opportunity, in particular in the South, without losing sight of the fact that there are dominant forces that are interested in profit, commercialization and incorporation.

As this analysis has shown, sociology can learn from cultural studies, if it considers this as a necessary completion. For many years, mainstream sociology did not satisfactorily consider the cultural dimension of social phenomena (cf. Long 1997). Therefore, a constructive dialogue with cultural studies should begin (cf. Kellner 1997; Denzin 1999; Winter 2001), one that questions the very foundations of the discipline and is willing to recognize its shortcomings. A revitalization of sociology can succeed if both culture and the processes of globalization are moved to the centre of analysis.

*Translated by Andrew Terrington*

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# Global America?

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