

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

¹Marshall 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.]

²Piper-Heidsieck: Brand of French champagne.

³America's top exports: Economists Incorporated for the International Intellectual Property Alliance, Executive Summary, 2000_SIVEK_EXEFC.pdf. Thanks to Siva Vaidyanathan 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 monocultural. 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,

⁴A 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.

What do American icons and styles mean to those who are not American? We can only imagine — but let us try. What young people graced with disposable income encounter in American television shows, movies, soft drinks, theme parks, and American-labeled (though not American-manufactured) running shoes, T-shirts, baggy pants, ragged jeans, and so on, is a way of being in the world, the experience of a flow of ready feelings and sensations bobbing up, disposable, dissolving, segueing to the next and the next after that. . . . It is a quality of immediacy and casualness not so different from what Americans desire. But what the young experience in the video game arcade or the music megastore is more than the flux of sensation. They flirt with a loose sort of social membership that requires little but a momentary (and monetary) surrender. Sampling American goods, images, and sounds, they affiliate with an empire of informality. Consuming a commodity, wearing a slogan or a logo, you affiliate with disaffiliation. You make a limited-liability connection, a virtual one. You borrow some of the effervescence that is supposed to emanate from this American staple, and hope to be recognized as one of the elect. When you wear the Israeli version that spells *Coca-Cola* in Hebrew, you express some worldwide connection with unknown peers, or a sense of irony, or both — in any event, a marker of membership. In a world of ubiquitous images, of easy mobility and casual tourism, you get to feel not only local or national but global — without locking yourself in a box so confining as to deserve the name "identity."

We are seeing on a world scale the familiar infectious rhythm of modernity. The money economy extends its reach, bringing with it a calculating mentality. Even in the poor countries it stirs the same hunger for private feeling, the same taste for disposable labels and sensations on demand, the same attention to fashion, the new and the now, that cropped up earlier in the West. Income beckons; income rewards. The taste for the marketed spectacle and the media-soaked way of life spreads. The culture consumer may not like the American goods in particular but still acquires a taste for the media's speed, formulas, and frivolity. Indeed, the lightness of

American-sponsored "identity" is central to its appeal. It imposes few burdens. Attachments and affiliations coexist, overlap, melt together, form, and re-form.

Marketers, like nationalists and fundamentalists, promote "identities," but for most people, the *mélange* is the message. Traditional bonds bend under pressure from imports. Media from beyond help you have your "roots" and eat them, too. You can watch Mexican television in the morning and American in the afternoon, or graze between Kurdish and English. You can consolidate family ties with joint visits to Disney World — making Orlando, Florida, the major tourist destination in the United States, and the Tokyo and Marne-la-Vallée spin-offs massive attractions in Japan and France. You can attach to your parents, or children, by playing oldie music and exchanging sports statistics. You plunge back into the media flux, looking for — what? Excitement? Some low-cost variation on known themes? Some next new thing? You don't know just what, but you will when you see it — or if not, you'll change channels.

As devotees of Japanese video games, Hong Kong movies, and Mexican *telenovelas* would quickly remind us, the blends, juxtapositions, and recombinations of popular culture are not just American. American and American-based models, styles, and symbols are simply the most far-flung, successful, and consequential. In the course of a century, America's entertainment corporations succeeded brilliantly in cultivating popular expectations for entertainment — indeed, the sense of a *right* to be entertained, a right that belongs to the history of modernity, the rise of market economies, and individualism. The United States, which began as Europe's collective fantasy, built a civilization to deliver the goods for playing, feeling, and meaning. Competitors ignore its success at their own peril, financial and otherwise.

The Supply Side

About the outward thrust of the American culture industry there is no mystery. The mainspring is the classic drive to expand markets. In the latter half of the 1980s,⁷ with worldwide deregulation, export sales increased from 30 percent to 40 percent of Hollywood's total revenue for television and film. Since then, the percentages have stabilized. In 2000,⁸ total foreign revenues for all film and video revenue streams averaged 37 percent — for theatrical releases, 51 percent; for television, 41 percent; and for video, 27 percent.

Exporters benefit from the economies of scale afforded by serial production. American industrialists have long excelled at efficiencies, first

⁷In the latter half of the 1980s: National Technical Information Service, *Globalization of the Mass Media* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, 1993), pp. 1–2, cited in Edward S. Herman and Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionsaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London: Cassell, 1997), p. 39.

⁸In 2000: Calculated from Schroder's *International Media and Entertainment Report 2000*, p. 37. Courtesy of David Lieberman, media business editor of *USA Today*.

anticipating and later developing the standardized production techniques of Henry Ford's assembly line. Early in the nineteenth century, minstrel shows⁹ were already being assembled from standardized components. Such efficiencies were later applied to burlesque, melodrama, vaudeville, radio soap opera, comic books, genre literature, musical comedy, and Hollywood studio productions. Cultural formula is not unique to the United States, but Americans were particularly adept at mass-producing it, using centralized management to organize road shows and coordinate local replicas.

If the American culture industry has long depended on foreign markets, foreign markets now also depend on American formulas: Westerns, action heroes, rock music, hip-hop. Globalized distribution expedites imitation. The American way generates proven results. Little imagination is required to understand why global entertainment conglomerates copy proven recipes or why theater owners outside the United States (many of whom are themselves American) want to screen them, even if they exaggerate the degree to which formula guarantees success. In a business freighted with uncertainty, the easiest decision is to copy. Individuals making careers also want to increase their odds of success.

It's a mistake to exaggerate the power of central supply to generate audiences, but the financial rewards of imitation are potentially so great, legions of entrepreneurs everywhere make the effort. All over the world, young filmmakers aspire to become the next Steven Spielberg or George Lucas, with their blatant emotional payoffs and predictable lines.

Around the world, as in the United States itself, America fabricated the templates, first, for Italian and Spanish Westerns, later for Hong Kong kung fu and "action," Europop, French soap operas, and so on. The Hollywood star system also came in for imitation everywhere. Even if, when faced with a choice,¹⁰ people tend to prefer domestically produced television to Hollywood goods, competitors in television, as in film and music, are pulled¹¹ into America's gravitational field.

The Demand Side

But the supply-side argument won't suffice to explain global cultural dominance. American popular culture is not uniquely formulaic or

⁹minstrel shows: Ostendorf, "What Makes American Popular Culture So Popular?" pp. 16–18, 47.

¹⁰when faced with a choice: Herman and McChesney, *Global Media*, p. 42. See also Tapio Varis, "Values and the Limits of the Global Media in the Age of Cyberspace," in Michael Prosser and K. S. Sitaram, eds., *Civic Discourse: Intercultural, International, and Global Media* (Stamford, CT: Ablex, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 5–17. During one week in the spring of 2001, not one of the fifty top-rated British TV shows was American.

¹¹competitors . . . are pulled: Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American: Anglo-American Media in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 50–51.

transportable. (Indeed, in 1900, 142 special trains¹² transported touring companies of actors and musicians throughout England and Wales every Sunday.) Moreover, availability is not popularity. No one forced Danes to watch *Dallas*, however cheaply purchased. In fact, when a new television entertainment chief took charge in 1981-82 and proceeded to cancel the show, thirty thousand protest letters¹³ poured in, and hundreds of Danes (mostly women, many rural) demonstrated in Copenhagen. When the chief's superiors told him he had better rethink his decision, he passed a sleepless night, bowed, and reversed himself. The dominance of American popular culture is a soft dominance—a collaboration. In the words of media analyst James Monaco, "American movies and TV are popular because they're popular."¹⁴

That popularity has much to do with the fusion of market-mindedness and cultural diversity. The United States has the advantages of a polyglot, multirooted (or rather, uprooted) society that celebrates its compound nature and common virtues (and sins) with remarkable energy. Popular culture, by the time it ships from American shores, has already been "pretested" on a heterogeneous public—a huge internal market with varied tastes. American popular culture is, after all, the rambunctious child of Europe and Africa. Our popular music and dance derive from the descendants of African slaves, among others. Our comic sense derives principally from the English, East European Jews, and, again, Africans; Americans, with growing Hispanic infusions. Our stories come from everywhere; consider Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*, inspired jointly by Dostoyevsky,¹⁵ African-American folktales, and jazz. American culture is spongy, or in James Monaco's happy term, *promiscuous*.¹⁶ He adds, "American culture simply doesn't exist without its African and European progenitors, and despite occasional outbursts of 'Americanism' it continues to accept almost any input."

To expand in the United States, popular culture had a clear avenue. It did not have to squeeze up against an aristocratic model, there being no wealthy landowning class to nourish one except in the plantation South—and there, slaves were the population that produced the most influential popular culture. Outside the South, from the early nineteenth century on, the market enjoyed prestige; it was no dishonor to produce culture for popular purposes. Ecclesiastical rivals were relatively weak. From the early

years of the Republic, American culture was driven¹⁷ by a single overriding purpose: to entertain the common man and woman. Hence Tocqueville's¹⁸ recognition that American artists cultivated popularity, not elevation; fun, not refinement. As Daniel Dayan¹⁹ has put it with only slight exaggeration, European (and traditional) cultures have a *superego*,²⁰ American culture does not. What is the market for entertainment if not a market for id?

Think about possible sources of competition, and the American advantage stands out. In the global market, bottom-up outsells top-down. Despite a tradition of popular culture, the main British model was classbound—culture as cultivation, culture as good for you. The head of the BBC's General Overseas Service²¹ complained in 1944 that "if any hundred British troops are invited to choose their own records 90 per cent of the choice will be of American stuff," and from then onward Americanization came in for much high-minded abuse. As for Soviet Russia, when it was a major world power, its culture was mainly didactic. (In 1972, Soviet film exports²² to its captive market in eastern and central Europe were still weaker, proportionately, than Hollywood's exports everywhere else in the world.) Who could produce fun like Americans? Who believed so fervently in colorful spectacle? In 1992, as France debated the establishment of Euro Disneyland outside Paris, as the theatrical director Ariane Mnouchkin denounced this "cultural Chernobyl" and French intellectuals joined her protest, it was not completely disingenuous for a Disney official²³ to deny the charge of American cultural imperialism by saying: "It's not America, it's Disney. . . . We're not trying to sell anything but fun, entertainment."

It is to America's advantage as well that commercial work emerges from

¹⁷*American culture was driven*: Library shelves groan with histories of popular American culture, but fundamental works worth singling out include Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950); Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); and Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987).

¹⁸*Tocqueville*: Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), French politician and writer, renowned for his observations on U.S. society and culture in *Democracy in America* (1835-40).

¹⁹*Daniel Dayan*: Personal communication, July 20, 2000.

²⁰*superego*: Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) divided the human personality into three functional parts: the id, which is dominated by the pleasure principle and the quest for immediate gratification; the superego, which internalizes the role of the parent and thus embodies social expectations that "censor" the urges of the id; and the ego, which results from the interaction of id and superego with the external world.

²¹*The head of the BBC's General Overseas Service*: Quoted in Asa Briggs, *The War of Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 567-68. *Americanization*: Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light* (London: Routledge/Comedia, 1988), pp. 52-76. There were exceptions, however. In the Noel Coward/David Lean film *Brief Encounter* (1946), the Trevor Howard character raves about the merits of Donald Duck as a distraction from the war.

²²*Soviet film exports*: Tunstall, *Media Are American*, p. 62.

²³*a Disney official*: Quoted in Todd Gitlin, "World Leaders: Mickey, et al." *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, May 3, 1992, p. 1.

¹²*142 special trains*: Cyril Ehrlich, *The Music Profession in Britain Since the Eighteenth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 56. Thanks to Peter Mandler for this reference.

¹³*thirty thousand protest letters*: Personal communication, Henrik Christiansen, former chief of entertainment for Danish television (and previously head of news), September 1998.

¹⁴*James Monaco*: "Images and Sounds as Cultural Commodities," p. 231, from an article I

clipped a long time ago but without noting from which magazine I'd clipped it.

¹⁵*Dostoyevsky*: Fyoder Michaylovich Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), Russian novelist.

¹⁶*Monaco's happy term*: Monaco, p. 231.

Hollywood, New York, and Nashville in the principal world language. Thanks to the British Empire-cum-Commonwealth, English is the second most commonly spoken native language in the world, and the most international. (The vast majority of those who speak the leading language, Chinese, live in a single country, and their language, tonal in speech and ideographic on paper, is not well adapted for export.) English is spoken and read as a second language more commonly than any other. Increasingly, the English that is taught and learned, the language in demand, is American, not British. It is the language of business and has acquired the cachet of international media. Of the major world languages, English is the most compressed; partly because of its Anglo-Saxon origins, the English version of any text is almost always shorter than translations in other languages. English is grammatically simple. American English in particular²⁴ is pungent, informal, absorptive, evolving, precise when called upon to be precise, transferable between written and verbal forms, lacking in sharp distinctions between "high" and "low" forms, and all in all, well adapted for slogans, headlines, comic strips, song lyrics, jingles, slang, dubbing, and other standard features of popular culture. English is, in a word, the most torrential language.

Moreover, the American language of images is even more accessible than the American language of words. The global popularity of Hollywood product often depends less on the spoken word, even when kept elementary (non-English-speakers everywhere could understand Arnold Schwarzenegger without difficulty), than on crackling edits, bright smiles, the camera tracking and swooping, the cars crashing off cliffs or smashing into other cars, the asteroids plunging dramatically toward earth. In action movies, as in the Westerns that preceded them, speech is a secondary mode of expression. European competitors cannot make this claim, though Hong Kong can.

It is also an export advantage that "American" popular culture is frequently not so American at all. "Hollywood" is an export platform that happens to be located on the Pacific coast of the United States but uses capital, hires personnel, and depicts sites from many countries. Disney casually borrows mythologies from Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, China, colonial America, the Old Testament, anywhere. Any myth can get the Disney treatment: simplified, smoothed down, prettified. Pavilions as emblems of foreign countries, sites as replicas of sites, *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio*, *Song of the South*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan* — Disney takes material where it can, as long as it comes out Disney's industrialized fun.

Moreover, to sustain market advantages, the Hollywood multinationals, ever thirsting for novelty, eagerly import, process, and export styles and practitioners from abroad. Consider, among directors, Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Sirk, Michael Curtiz, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, Ridley Scott, Peter Weir, Bruce Beresford, Paul Verhoeven, John Woo, Ang Lee. (The big Hollywood movie of 1996, *Independence Day*, with its rousing nationalist features, was directed by the German Roland Emmerich — a

²⁴American English in particular: Tunstall, *Media Are American*, pp. 127–8.

Hollywood fact reminiscent of Louis B. Mayer's decision²⁵ to celebrate his birthday on July 4.) Consider, among stars, Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, Anthony Quinn, Sean Connery, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mel Gibson, Hugh Grant, Jackie Chan, Kate Winslet, Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yun-Fat, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Antonio Banderas, Penelope Cruz. Hollywood is the global magnet — and (to mix metaphors) the acid bath into which, often enough, talent dissolves. Even the locales come from everywhere, or nowhere. It is striking how many blockbusters take place in outer space (the *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *Star Trek* series), in the prenational past (the *Jurassic Park* series), in the post-national future (the *Planet of the Apes* series, the two *Terminator* films, *The Matrix*), at sea (*Titanic*, *The Perfect Storm* — the latter also directed by a German, Wolfgang Petersen), or on an extended hop-skip-and-jump around the world (the James Bond series, *Mission: Impossible*).

In music, cultural import-export relations can be intricate. What exactly is an "American" style anyway? In the art critic Harold Rosenberg's phrase, the great American tradition is "the tradition of the new."²⁶ The cultural gates are poorly guarded and swing both ways. American rhythm and blues influenced Jamaican ska, which evolved into reggae, which in turn was imported to the United States, mainly via Britain. "Musicians in the Kingston tenement yards²⁷ picked up poor reception of New Orleans radio stations," writes music journalist Vivien Goldman, "and retransmitted boogie woogie piano, horn sections, and strolling, striding bass into Jamaica's insidious one drop groove and scratchy skanga-skanga guitar." The Jamaican custom of "toasting," with the disc jockey talking over prerecorded rhythm tracks (a style that in turn derived from African griot "chats"), led to "dub," in which the DJ remixed the song, which in turn evolved into American rap. The "trance-like quality" of dub's "thudding bass" led to "the incantatory, undulating repetitions of ambient and rave music." American punks²⁸ who imported ska from London in the 1990s were not necessarily aware that it was Jamaican. Mambo, tango, bossa nova, techno — dancing America puts up no obstacles to imported energies. The result is not an American equivalent of France's *mission civilisatrice*,²⁹ arguably it is the opposite, in which

²⁵Louis B. Mayer's decision: Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988), p. 3.

²⁶Harold Rosenberg: *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Grove, 1961). Rosenberg was referring to modernism in the arts, but he might equally well have meant popular culture.

²⁷"Musicians in the Kingston tenement yards": Vivien Goldman, "One Drop of Mighty Dread: How Jamaica Changed the World's Music," *CommonQuest* 4, no. 3 (2000), pp. 23, 22, 25.

²⁸American punks: *Ibid.*, p. 27. American food has been and continues to be shaped by a similar hybridization, which is the point of the joke about the tourist who walks up to a stranger in New York and asks where he can get a pizza. The stranger points to a Chinese restaurant. Perplexed, the tourist walks into the restaurant and says hesitantly to a waiter, "Is it really true that you serve pizza?" "Of course," is the answer, "what size would you like, and what topping? We have mushroom, pepperoni —" "Excuse me," says the tourist, "but I don't understand why a Chinese restaurant serves pizza." The waiter replies, "For all our Jewish customers!"

²⁹mission civilisatrice: French for "civilizing mission."

American teenagers shimmy through the malls to the rhythms of the wretched of the earth.

No matter. Of Americanized popular culture, nothing more or less is asked but that it be *interesting*, a portal into the pleasure dome. In the main, an all-too-bearable lightness³⁰ is what the traffic will bear. Not for American culture the televisual intricacies of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*, or the subtlety and inwardness of the great European filmmakers, or the historical scale of Latin Americans, Japanese, and Chinese. Not for American popular culture the presumption of Art with a capital A, known colloquially as *artiness*. Playful, expressive, comfortably uplifting—a host of styles and themes converge in what the psychologist Martha Wolfenstein called a *fun morality*: Thou Shalt Have Fun.³¹

ENGAGING THE TEXT

1. What specific qualities, values, and attitudes does Gitlin identify with American culture? Why, in his view, are these aspects of American culture so attractive to people in other countries? To what extent do these qualities and attitudes strike you as particularly "American"? Are there any others that you would add to Gitlin's list?
2. What does American global media do to local cultures and regional identities, according to Gitlin? What takes the place of local identity in the media-dominated world that Gitlin describes? What, in your estimation, is gained or lost in this transaction?
3. What is Gitlin suggesting when he says that American culture is "spongy" or "promiscuous"—or when he says that American popular culture produces entertainment for the "id" and not for the "superego"? What does he mean when he claims that, unlike traditional cultures, American culture is "bottom-up" instead of "top-down"? To what extent would you agree with these depictions of U.S. popular culture? Why?
4. In what way has the English language itself contributed to the worldwide dominance of American culture, according to Gitlin? Why, in this view, is English particularly well suited to a commercial culture built on advertising, slogans, headlines, and comic strips?
5. Overall, how would you characterize Gitlin's attitude toward American popular culture? Does he see it as a threat to the rest of the world, as an invitation to freedom, or simply as a source of pleasure? What concerns or limitations do you see in the "fun morality" that Gitlin identifies with America's cultural influence across the world? Is it in any way distasteful, for example, for American teens to "shimmy through the malls to the rhythms of the wretched of the earth" (para. 24)?

³⁰all-too-bearable lightness: An allusion to the title of Czech author Milan Kundera's (b. 1929) novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984).

³¹Martha Wolfenstein: "The Emergence of Fun Morality," in Eric Larrabee, ed., *Mass Leisure* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), p. 86.

EXPLORING CONNECTIONS

6. To what extent might Gitlin's analysis of American culture be seen as supporting Dinesh D'Souza's view of what America represents to the rest of the world (p. 768)? How would you expect people who live in "traditional" Middle Eastern, Asian, or African societies to respond to a foreign culture that respects only "the tradition of the new"?
7. How might David Kupelian (p. 646) respond to Gitlin's analysis of America's "fun culture"? How might Kupelian view the impact of American popular culture on other, more traditional societies?

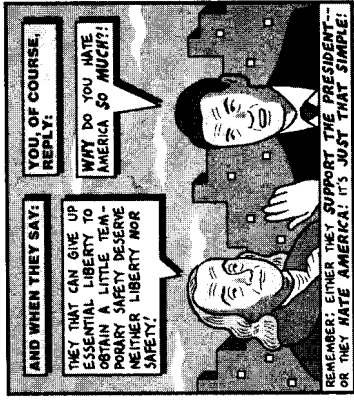
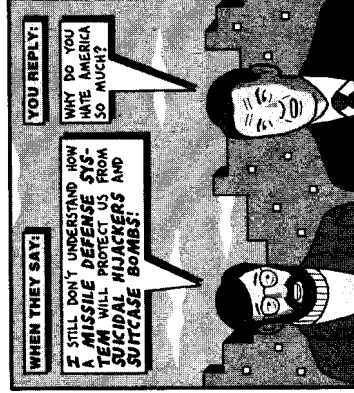
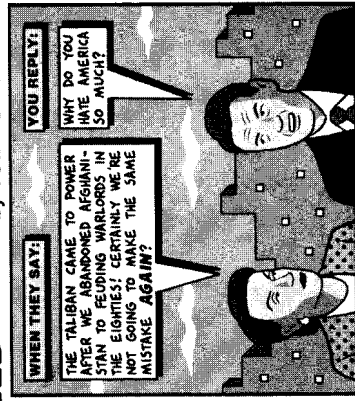
EXTENDING THE CRITICAL CONTEXT

8. Pool your knowledge of American pop music to test Gitlin's claims about how it has been influenced by other cultures from around the world. What specific "foreign" influences can you identify in recent pop music hits? What types or styles of popular music seem to be most open to non-American influences? Would you agree, as Gitlin suggests, that it's difficult to define what "American style" amounts to in relation to contemporary music?

THIS MODERN WORLD

A PATRIOT'S GUIDE TO DEBATING THE WAR ON TERROR

by TOM TOMORROW



REMEMBER: EITHER THEY SUPPORT THE PRESIDENT-- OR THEY HATE AMERICA! IT'S JUST THAT SIMPLE!