

newsprint and through visa policies, import restriction, and many other procedures. "Some governments find it natural to assume total control over the content of information, justifying themselves by the ideology in which they believe. Even on purely pragmatic standards, it is doubtful if this system can be called realistic."

Democratization of communication

Surveying the "spectrum of communication in modern society," the commission found that it almost defies description because of its immense variety. Barriers could readily be seen: monopolistic controls, technical disparities, restrictive media practices, exclusion of disadvantaged groups, blacklist, censorship. Nevertheless, a tendency toward democratization seemed to be taking place – for example, in the growing role of public opinion. Governments throughout the world were becoming increasingly aware that they must take into account not only national opinion but "world public opinion," because today's media are capable of diffusing "information on international questions to every part of the world." Occasionally opinion crystallizes on some issue with enough force to compel action. This happened, as the commission saw it, on the issues of colonialism, apartheid, and nuclear proliferation. But a meaningful process of opinion formation will in the long run require richer media fare, development of widespread "critical awareness," assertion of the "right to reply," the establishment of "alternative channels of communication," and public participation in decision making on media policies. The goal, the commission felt, should be that everyone would be both "producer and consumer of communication." [...]

38 Peripheral Vision

*John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka, and
Stuart Cunningham*

Instead of the image of "the West" at the centre dominating the peripheral "Third World" with an outward flow of cultural products, we see the world as divided into a number of regions which each have their own internal dynamics as well as their global ties. Although primarily based on geographic realities, these regions are also defined by common cultural, linguistic, and historical connections which transcend physical space. Such a dynamic, regionalist view of the world helps us to analyse in a more nuanced way the intricate and multi-directional flows of television across the globe.

New Patterns of Television Flow

Public discourse about television and the media-studies literature are both replete with anxiety about the supposed cultural effects of the global spread of programmes like *Dallas* or, more recently, *Beverly Hills 90210*. The unquestioned basis for this anxiety is expressed in the orthodox critical paradigm for analysing the connection between international power relations and the media, the thesis of "cultural imperialism", or more particularly, "media imperialism". According to this view, world patterns of communication flow, both in density and in direction, mirror the system of domination in the economic and political order. Thus, world centres like New York, Los Angeles, London, and Tokyo are major nodes for international telecommunications traffic, as well as for other kinds of flows, such as television programmes. The media imperialism perspective more particularly sees that the major world sources for programme exports are located in the USA and secondarily in Europe, mainly the UK, and that these centres act as nodes through which all flows of cultural products must pass, including those from one peripheral part of the world to another.

The *locus classicus* of the cultural imperialism thesis is found in the work of Herbert Schiller. As recently as 1991, in an article tellingly entitled "Not Yet the Post-Imperialist Era", he has restated his position in the following way: "The role of television in the global arena of cultural domination has not diminished in the 1990s. Reinforced by new delivery systems – communication satellites and cable networks – the image flow is heavier than ever. Its source of origin also has not changed that much in the last quarter of the century". The classic study for UNESCO by

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Nordenstreng and Varis in 1974 documented the dominance of the USA in world television programme exports at that time. Television programme flows became an integral issue for the New World Information Order movement and its debate within UNESCO. As this continued into the 1980s, the cultural imperialism view of international domination stood challenged only by those who were seen as apologists for the USA and its demand for a "free flow" international regime for trade in cultural products. Neither critics nor apologists questioned the oft-quoted factoid that entertainment is second only to aerospace as an export industry for the USA.

Indeed, as long as the flows of television programme exports seemed to continue along the "one-way street" from the West (and the USA in particular) to the rest of the world, the critical discourse of cultural imperialism was a plausible theoretical response, at least in its more subtle variations, notably that of "cultural dependence" and "media imperialism". In an essential respect, the cultural imperialism perspective was the then-current neo-Marxist analysis of capitalist culture projected on to an international scale: the "dominant ideology" thesis writ large. As such, it had the all-embracing appeal of a comprehensive theory, and also provided the high moral ground from which the international activities of USA networks and the ideological content of their television programmes could be analysed, and then denounced.

However, by the mid-1980s it became evident that the cultural imperialism discourse had serious inadequacies, both as theory and in terms of the reality which the theory purported to explain. Actual transformation of the world television system made it less and less sustainable on the empirical level, and shifting theoretical paradigms, including postmodernism, postcolonialism, and theories of the "active" audience, made its conceptual foundations less secure. To take the empirical aspect first, Jeremy Tunstall had long since pointed out that the "television imperialism thesis" of such writers as Schiller and Wells was based on the quite incorrect assumption that the high levels of USA programme imports into Latin America in the 1960s were a permanent condition rather than a transitional stage in the development of television in these regions. The other empirical development which ought to have given pause to theorists of cultural imperialism was the research reported by Varis as an update of the original "one-way street" project, in which he noted "a trend toward greater regional exchanges", in spite of continued USA and European dominance in television programme flows. This finding was reinforced by other studies around the same time which, although absurdly exaggerated in their estimation of how far the flows had formed new patterns, were able nevertheless to document just how one such regional market was taking shape, in the case of Latin America.

Thus, even in Latin America, virtually the cradle of the theorization of cultural imperialism, USA imports were prominent only in the early stages. As the industry matured in Latin America, and as it developed "critical mass", USA imports were to some extent replaced by local products, a pattern that can be found repeated many times over around the world, and which is currently shaping Europe's new privately owned services. Of course, not all countries in Latin America have the capacity to develop sizeable indigenous television production industries. Rather, the pattern in Latin America, as in Asia and the Middle East, is that each "geolinguistic region", as we shall call them, is itself dominated by one or two centres of audiovisual production – Mexico and Brazil for Latin America, Hong Kong and Taiwan for the Chinese-speaking populations of Asia, Egypt for the Arab world, and India for the Indian populations of Africa and Asia. The Western optic through which the cultural imperialism thesis was developed literally did not see these non-Western systems of regional exchange, nor understand what they represented. Yet by the late 1980s,

Tracey could observe that the "very general picture of TV flows . . . is not a one-way street; rather there are a number of main thoroughfares, with a series of not unimportant smaller roads".

We have noted how, as theory, the cultural imperialism critique tended to identify the USA as the single centre of a process of mediacentric capitalist cultural influence which emanated out to the rest of the world in the form of television programmes. It also assumed that these programmes had an inevitable and self-sufficient ideological effect upon their helpless audiences in the periphery. Although this rationale established a theoretical connection between US television programmes and "consumerism", it did not address the question of just how such a mechanism of effect might work, nor how it could be observed in action upon actual audiences. In the discourse of cultural imperialism, the mystique of television entertainment's multivalent appeal for its audiences, and how specific audiences responded to it, were never on the agenda.

Other shortcomings arose from the theory's emphasis on external forces from the USA, and the corresponding disregard for the internal sociological factors within the countries seen to be subject to them. In its eagerness to hold US companies, and behind them, the US government, responsible for regressive sociocultural changes in the "Third World", the cultural imperialism critique neglected the internal historical and social dynamics within the countries susceptible to their influence. This left out of consideration the strategic social structural position of the individuals and interest groups who benefited from facilitating US market entry or even from taking their own initiatives. Some of these have subsequently built up their own international media empires, such as Mexico and Brazil. Other players have more recently joined the game, such as some Saudi investors, while investment in the new channels in India by expatriates shows that media entrepreneurship also can be widespread on a small scale. The cultural imperialism theory failed to see that, more fundamental than its supposed ideological influence, the legacy of the USA in world television development was in the implantation of its systemic model for television as a medium – the exploitation of entertainment content so as to attract audiences which could then be sold to advertisers. American content may have primed this process, but as the experience of many parts of the peripheral world shows, it is not required to sustain it.

We should also note that with its dichotomized view of "the West" versus the "Third World", the cultural imperialism theory was unable to give an adequate account of semi-peripheral settler societies such as Australia and Canada, where the experience of colonialism, and postcolonialism, has been quite distinct from that of nations in other former colonized zones, a distinctiveness manifest in the television systems which they developed.

The basic assumption of Western domination via television is worth further comment. Paradoxically, even though the cultural imperialism thesis has been articulated in the name of defending the "Third World" against domination by audiovisual products from the USA, it is more inclined to reinforce Western cultural influence by taking it as given, when it should be challenging it. A more postcolonial perspective in theory has forced us to realize that USA domination always was limited, either by cultural or political "screens", or both. A related weakness or "blind spot" of the cultural imperialism thesis has been its over-emphasis on the significance of imported *vis-à-vis* local television. Television has always been more of a local than a global medium, and remains so, although the increasingly multichannel and globalized nature of the industry may alter the balance at the margin in the longer term.

According to figures from 1989, the volume of purely domestic material in national markets is twenty-nine times higher than that which is traded. Television is still a gloriously hybrid medium, with a plethora of programming of an inescapably and essentially local, untranslatable nature.

Although US programmes might lead the world in their transportability across cultural boundaries, and even manage to dominate schedules on some channels in particular countries, they are rarely the most popular programmes where viewers have a reasonable menu of locally produced material to choose from. And even where there is imported content, it is no longer acceptable to read off from that fact alone any presumed effects of a cultural or political kind. Hamid Naficy captures this vividly in his brilliant study of television amongst Iranian exiles in Los Angeles. Describing how his exclusively English-speaking Iranian daughter, Shayda, and his exclusively German-speaking Iranian niece, Setarah, communicated through the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, he goes on to comment:

The globalization of American pop culture does not automatically translate into globalization of American control. This globalized culture provides a shared discursive space where transnationals such as Setarah and Shayda can localize it, make their own uses of it, domesticate and indigenize it. They may think with American cultural products but they do not think American. [...]

"Gatekeepers" and Cultural Industry Factors in Television Flows

Many cross-cultural studies emphasize the diverse, localized character of international audience responses, and are imbued with a sense of the viability and integrity of the cultures of peripheral or "small" nations. So it is somewhat ironic, because of the dominance of American programmes at highly visible though only provisionally premium places in schedules, that such studies should focus on US programmes almost exclusively. As Ellen Seiter argues strongly with regard to the theoretical field from which this position draws, "in our concern for audiences' pleasures... we run the risk of continually validating Hollywood's domination of the worldwide television market".

Far more than for the USA, the success or otherwise of peripheral nations' exports is contingent on factors other than those captured by established modes of audience study. This explains why so little audience reception research has been able to be conducted on their products in international markets, and why we need instead middle-range analysis to do so. In the middle range between political economy approaches and reception analysis, a number of factors are mediating. How are programmes acquired overseas? Who engages in their appraisal and acquisition and what perceptions have they formed of peripheral programming? This "primary audience" is the major source of informed "gatekeeping" which regulates (in the widest sense) the flow of peripheral programming in international markets. And what are the characteristics of the major territories which influence the success or failure of such programmes internationally? All these mediating factors embody legitimate, indeed central, aspects of cultural exchange, as virtually all the significant research on non-dominant nations' television production and reception indicates.

The actual structure of major international television trade markets is central to middle-range analysis. There is an ever-wider variety of modes of contracting for international programme production and exchange: offshore, co-production, official co-production, co-venture (including presales), and straight purchase of territorial

rights for completed programmes in the major trade markets such as MIP-TV and MIPCOM. These run on annual cycles suited to the programming and scheduling patterns of the major northern hemisphere territories, but a notable shift in the patterns of global television traffic was indicated in 1994 when the first MIP-Asia was held, a trade market specifically for the Asian region. At such events, programming is often bought (or not bought) on the basis of company reputation or distributor clout, in job lots and sight-unseen. Very broad, rough-and-ready genre expectations are in play; judgements may seem highly "subjective" and arbitrary.

Universalist explanations may prove useful in accounting for the international successes of historically universal forms like US series drama, but there is solid evidence that cultural specificities, along with other middle-range industrial factors, are unavoidable and, at times, enabling factors for international success in peripheral countries' export activity. Studies which compare viewers' engagement with US as against other sources of television programming confirm that there tends to be a more distanced realm of "pure entertainment" within which US programmes are processed – as markers of modish modernity, as a "spectacular" world – compared to more culturally specific responses made to domestic and other sources.

The capacity for peripheral countries to export their programmes across diverse markets is to some extent based on their substitutability or non-substitutability for US material, although this also depends in part on the type of channel they are purchased for. Australian productions have provided useful models from which the protocols of commercial popularity may be learnt in rapidly commercializing European broadcasting environments, but the fact that Australian programmes are perceived as imitations of US formats constitutes a problem for both commentators and regulators in Europe.

To be sure, the structure of content and the form of internationally popular serial drama in particular are widely shared and may even be "borrowed" from US practice, as the *telenovela* was decades ago. But the "surface" differences, nevertheless, almost always are consequential, and contribute to the acceptance or rejection of non-US material, depending on whether the "primary audience" of gatekeepers and the viewing audience respond positively or negatively to those differences. As Anne Cooper-Chen has shown, even that most transparently internationalized of television formats, the game show, contains significant differences in the widely variant cultures in which it is popular. After looking at popular game shows in fifty countries, she regards them as having at least three structural variants – the East Asian, Western, and Latin models – and innumerable surface particularities. Hamid Mowlana and Mehdi Rad show that the Japanese programme *Oshin* found acceptance in Iran because its values of perseverance and long suffering were compatible with cultural codes prevalent in what might appear a distinctly different society. The evidence for the popularity of *Neighbours* in Britain demonstrates that, while Australian soaps arguably were brought into the market as substitutes for US material, their popularity built around textual factors based on projections and introjections of Australian "life-style". Australia has served in many ways as a kind of "other" to Britain – the younger, more upstart and hedonistic vision of how the British might like to see themselves.

The "export of meaning" is not just a matter of viewer reception. Many nations, both core and peripheral, place special importance on the international profile they can establish with their audiovisual exports. These are fostered both as a form of cultural diplomacy, and for intrinsic economic reasons, although national cultural objectives and audiovisual industry development are not always compatible, as

Australia and Canada have long been aware, and some Asian countries are now learning. In the case of the Middle East, one commentator has observed that the popularity of Egyptian television exports in the Arab states has a number of cultural and even political "multiplier effects". This popularity was preceded by the success of Egyptian films, and carries with it a potential acceptance and recognition of Egyptian accents and performers that can operate as "a soft-sell commercial for Egyptian values" which then carries over into indirect political leverage. While it might be difficult to isolate and measure them, it is not unreasonable to infer cultural, trade, and political multiplier effects from what can be seen of peripheral nations' products on the world's television screens. [...]

Even amongst the globalization theorists, it is becoming a commonplace to observe that the globalizing forces towards "homogenization", such as satellite television, exist in tension with contradictory tendencies towards "heterogenization", conceived pessimistically as fragmentation, or with postmodernist optimism, as pluralism. Thus, "identity and cultural affiliation are no longer matters open to the neat simplifications of traditional nationalism. They are matters of ambiguity and complexity, of overlapping loyalties and symbols with multiple meanings". To the extent that we can assume that television is in fact a source of identity, and that audiences for the same programme derive similar identities from it, it becomes possible to think of identities which are multiple, although also often contradictory, corresponding to the different levels from which the televisual environment is composed in a given market. An Egyptian immigrant in Britain, for example, might think of herself as a Glaswegian when she watches her local Scottish channel, a British resident when she switches over to the BBC, an Islamic Arab expatriate in Europe when she tunes in to the satellite service from the Middle East, and a world citizen when she channel surfs on to CNN. [...]

39 Cultural Imperialism

John Tomlinson

"Watching Dallas": The Imperialist Text and Audience Research

For many critics, the American TV series *Dallas* had become the byword for cultural imperialism in the 1980s. Ien Ang's study, *Watching Dallas* takes as its central question the tension between the massive international popularity of the Texan soap opera:

... in over ninety countries, ranging from Turkey to Australia, from Hong Kong to Great Britain ... with the proverbial empty streets and dramatic drop in water consumption when an episode of the series is going out ...

and the reaction of cultural commentators to this "success":

Dallas was regarded as yet more evidence of the threat posed by American-style commercial culture against authentic national identities. In February 1983 for instance, Jack Lang, the French Minister for Culture ... had even proclaimed *Dallas* as the "symbol of American cultural imperialism".

Ang detects amongst European cultural critics an "ideology of mass culture" by which she means a generalised hostility towards the imported products of the American mass culture industry, which has fixed on *Dallas* as the focus of its contempt.

Ang quotes Michelle Mattelart:

It is not for nothing that *Dallas* casts its ubiquitous shadow wherever the future of culture is discussed: it has become the perfect hate symbol, the cultural poverty ... against which one struggles.

The evident popularity of *Dallas* juxtaposed with its hostile critical reception amongst "professional intellectuals" and the linked charges of cultural imperialism poses for us nicely the problem of the audience in the discourse of media imperialism. For the cultural critics tend to condemn *Dallas* with scant regard to the way in which the audience may read the text.

Cultural imperialism is once more seen as an ideological property of the text itself. It is seen as inhering in the images of dazzling skyscrapers, expensive clothes and

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automobiles, lavish settings, the celebration in the narrative of power and wealth and so on. All this is seen to have an obvious ideological manipulative effect on the viewer. As Lealand has put it:

There is an assumption that American TV imports do have an impact whenever and wherever they are shown, but actual investigation of this seldom occurs. Much of the evidence that is offered is merely anecdotal or circumstantial. Observations of . . . Algerian nomads watching *Dallas* in the heat of the desert are offered as sufficient proof.

However, encouraged by developments in British critical media theory, some writers have attempted to probe the audience reception of "imperialist texts" like *Dallas*. Ien Ang's study, although it is not primarily concerned with the issue of media imperialism, is one such.

Ang approaches the *Dallas* audience with the intention of investigating an hypothesis generated from her own experience of watching *Dallas*. She found that her own enjoyment of the show chafed against the awareness she had of its ideological content. Her critical penetration as "an intellectual and a feminist" of this ideology suggested to her that the pleasure she derived from the programme had little connection with, and certainly did not entail, an ideological effect. In reacting to the ideology in the text, she argues, the cultural critics overlook the crucial question in relation to the audience: "For we must accept one thing: *Dallas* is popular because a lot of people somehow *enjoy* watching it."

Ang saw the popularity of the show, which might be read as a sign of its imperialist ideological power, as a complex phenomenon without a single cause, but owing a good deal to the intrinsic pleasure to be derived from its melodramatic narrative structure. The show's ability to connect with "the melodramatic imagination" and the pleasure this provides were, Ang thought, the key to its success, and these had no necessary connection with the power of American culture or the values of consumer capitalism. What the cultural critics overlooked was the capacity of the audience to negotiate the possible contradictions between alien cultural values and the "pleasure of the text".

Ang's study was based on a fairly informal empirical procedure. She placed an advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine asking people to write to her describing what they liked or disliked about *Dallas*. Her correspondents revealed a complex set of reactions, including evidence that some did indeed, like Ang herself, manage to resolve a conflict between their distaste for the ideology of the show and a pleasure in watching it. For example:

Dallas. . . God, don't talk to me about it. I'm hooked on it! But you wouldn't believe the number of people who say to me, "Oh, I thought you were against Capitalism?" I am, but *Dallas* is just so tremendously exaggerated, it has nothing to do with capitalists any more, it's just sheer artistry to make up such nonsense.

Ang found such a high level of disapproval for the cultural values of *Dallas* in some of her correspondents that she speaks of their views being informed by the "ideology of mass culture" of the cultural critics. These viewers, she argues, have internalised what they perceive as the "correct" attitude towards mass-cultural imports – that of the disapproving professional intellectuals. They thus feel the need to justify their enjoyment of the show by, for example, adopting an ironic stance towards it.

Alternatively, she suggests, an opposing "anti-intellectual" ideological discourse of "populism" may allow the *Dallas* fan to refuse the ideology of mass culture as elitist and paternalist, and to insist (in such popular maxims as "there's no accounting for taste") on their right to their pleasure without cultural "guilt".

Ang's analysis of the ideological positioning and struggle around the text of *Dallas* is not without its problems. But her empirical work does at the very least suggest how naive and improbable is the simple notion of an immediate ideological effect arising from exposure to the imperialist text. The complex, reflective and self-conscious reactions of her correspondents suggest that cultural critics who assume this sort of effect massively underestimate the audience's active engagement with the text and the critical sophistication of the ordinary viewer/reader.

The same message comes from most recent studies of audience response. Katz and Liebes, for instance, also looked at reactions to *Dallas*, but in a rather more formal empirical study than Ang's. Their work involved a large-scale cross-cultural study of the impact of *Dallas*, comparing different ethnic groups in Israel with a group of American viewers. Katz and Liebes situate themselves within the growing perspective in media research which sees the audience as active and the process of meaning construction as one of "negotiation" with the text in a particular cultural context. They argue that this perspective:

raises a question about the apparent ease with which American television programmes cross cultural and linguistic frontiers. Indeed, the phenomenon is so taken for granted that hardly any systematic research has been done to explain the reasons why these programmes are so successful. One wonders how such quintessentially American products are understood at all. The often-heard assertion that this phenomenon is part of the process of cultural imperialism presumes, first, that there is an American message in the content and form; second, that this message is somehow perceived by viewers; and, third, that it is perceived in the same way by viewers in different cultures.

Katz and Liebes, like Ang, are generally dubious about the way in which the media imperialism argument has been presented by its adherents:

Since the effects attributed to a TV programme are often inferred from content analysis alone, it is of particular interest to examine the extent to which members of the audience absorb, explicitly or implicitly, the messages which critics and scholars allege they are receiving.

Their study of *Dallas* thus represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt so far to examine the media imperialism argument empirically from the perspective of audience response. In order to do this, they organised fifty "focus groups" consisting of three couples each to watch an episode of *Dallas*. The idea of watching the programme in groups was essential to one of their guiding premises, that the meanings of TV texts are arrived at via a *social* process of viewing and discursive interpretation. They believe, in common with other recent views, that TV viewing is not essentially an isolated individual practice, but one in which social interaction – "conversation with significant others" – is a vital part of the interpretative and evaluative process. This may be even more significant when the programme in question is the product of an alien culture and, thus, potentially more difficult to "decode".

The groups that Katz and Liebes arranged were all from similar class backgrounds – "lower middle class with high school education or less" – and each group was "ethnically homogeneous":

There were ten groups each of Israeli Arabs, new immigrants to Israel from Russia, first- and second-generation immigrants from Morocco and Kibbutz members. Taking these groups as a microcosm of the worldwide audience of *Dallas*, we are comparing their "readings" of the programme with ten groups of matched Americans in Los Angeles.

The groups followed their viewing of *Dallas* with an hour-long "open structured" discussion and a short individual questionnaire. The discussions were recorded and formed the basic data of the study, what Katz and Liebes refer to as "ethno-semiological data".

The groups were invited to discuss, first, simply what happened in the episode – "the narrative sequence, and the topics, issues and themes with which the programme deals". Even at this basic level Katz and Liebes found examples of divergent readings influenced, they argue, by the cultural background of the groups and reinforced by their interaction. One of the Arabic groups actually "misread" the information of the programme in a way which arguably made it more compatible with their cultural horizon. In the episode viewed, Sue Ellen had taken her baby and run away from her husband JR, moving into the house of her former lover and his father. However, the Arab group confirmed each other in the more conventional reading – in their terms – that she had actually gone to live in her *own* father's house. The implications of this radical translation of the events of the narrative must at least be to undermine the notion that texts cross cultural boundaries intact.

More importantly, perhaps, Katz and Liebes found that different ethnic groups brought their own values to a judgement of the programme's values. They quote a Moroccan Jew's assessment:

Machluf: You see, I'm a Jew who wears a skullcap and I learned from this series to say, "Happy is our lot, goodly is our fate" that we're Jewish. Everything about JR and his baby, who has maybe four or five fathers, who knows? The mother is Sue Ellen, of course, and the brother of Pam left. Maybe he's the father. . . . I see that they're almost all bastards.

This sort of response, which seems to be not just a rejection of Western decadence, but an actual reinforcement of the audience's own cultural values, extended from issues of interpersonal and sexual morality to the programme's celebration of wealth: "With all that they have money, my life style is higher than theirs." However, here, at the "real foundations", Katz and Liebes found a more typical response to be an agreement on the importance of money:

Miriam: Money will get you anything. That's why people view it. People sit at home and want to see how it looks.
[. . .]

Yosef: Everybody wants to be rich. Whatever he has, he wants more.

Zari: Who doesn't want to be rich? The whole world does.

It scarcely needs saying that responses like these demonstrate no more than agreement with aspects of the perceived message of *Dallas* and cannot be taken as evidence of the programme's ideological effect. All cultures, we must surely assume, will generate their own set of basic attitudes on issues like the relationship between wealth and happiness. *Dallas* represents, perhaps, one very forceful statement of such an attitude, informed by a dominant global culture of capitalism. But it would be absurd

to assume that people in any present-day culture do not have developed attitudes to such a central aspect of their lives quite independent of any televisual representations. We clearly cannot assume that simply watching *Dallas* makes people want to be rich! The most we can assume is that agreement here, as with disagreement elsewhere with the programme's message, represents the outcome of people's "negotiations" with the text.

Katz and Liebes are careful not to draw any premature conclusions from this complex data. But they do at least suggest that it supports their belief in the active social process of viewing and demonstrates a high level of sophistication in the discursive interpretations of ordinary people. They also make the interesting suggestion that the social and economic distance between the affluent denizens of the Southfork Range and their spectators around the globe is of less consequence than might be thought: "Unhappiness is the greatest leveller." This thought chimes with Ang's argument that it is the melodramatic nature of the narrative and its appeal to the "tragic structure of feeling", rather than its glimpses of consumer capitalism at its shiny leading edge that scores *Dallas*'s global ratings.

The general message of empirical studies – informal ones like Ang's and more large-scale formal projects like Katz and Liebes's – is that audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and "invasion" than many critical media theorists have assumed. [. . .]

Multinational Capitalism and Cultural Homogenisation

Critics of multinational capitalism frequently do complain of its tendency towards cultural convergence and homogenisation. This is the major criticism made in the discourse of cultural imperialism which takes capitalism as its target. A good example is Cees Hamelink's book, *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications*. Hamelink, who acknowledges the co-operation of both Schiller and Salinas, places the issues of cultural autonomy and cultural homogenisation – or what he refers to as "cultural synchronisation" – at the centre of his analysis. He is broadly correct in identifying the processes of "cultural synchronization" (or homogenisation) as unprecedented in historical terms and in seeing these processes as closely connected to the spread of global capitalism. But he fails to show why cultural synchronisation should be objected to and, specifically, he fails to show that it should be objected to on the grounds of cultural autonomy.

In his opening chapter Hamelink lists a number of personal "experiences of the international scene" to illustrate his thesis. For example:

In a Mexican village the traditional ritual dance precedes a soccer match, but the performance features a gigantic Coca-Cola bottle.

In Singapore, a band dressed in traditional Malay costume offers a heart-breaking imitation of Fats Domino.

In Saudi Arabia, the television station performs only one local cultural function – the call for the Moslem prayer. Five times a day, North American cops and robbers yield to the traditional muezzin.

In its gigantic advertising campaign, IBM assures Navajo Indians that their cultural identity can be effectively protected if they use IBM typewriters equipped with the Navajo alphabet.

The first thing to note about these examples is precisely their significance as *personal* observations – and this is not to make any trivial point about their “subjective” nature. Hamelink expresses the cultural standpoint of the concerned Westerner confronting a perplexing set of global phenomena. We have to accept, at the level of the personal, the sincerity of his concern and also the validity of this personal discourse: it is valid for individuals to express their reaction to global tendencies. But we need to acknowledge that this globe-trotting instancing of cultural imperialism shapes the discourse in a particular way: to say “here is the *sameness* that capitalism brings – and here – and here . . .” is to assume, however liberal, radical or critical the intention, the role of the “tourist”: the problem of homogenisation is likely to present itself to the Western intellectual who has a sense of the diversity and “richness” of global culture as a particular threat. For the people involved in each discrete instance Hamelink presents, the experience of Western capitalist culture will probably have quite different significance. Only if they can adopt the (privileged) role of the cultural tourist will the sense of the homogenisation of global culture have the same threatening aspect. The Kazakhstani tribesman who has no knowledge of (and, perhaps, no interest in) America or Europe is unlikely to see his cassette player as emblematic of creeping capitalist domination. And we cannot, without irony, argue that the Western intellectual’s (informed?) concern is more valid: again much hangs on the question, “who speaks?”

This said, Hamelink does draw from these instances an empirical conclusion which is, I think, fairly uncontroversial:

One conclusion still seems unanimously shared: the impressive variety of the world’s cultural systems is waning due to a process of “cultural synchronisation” that is without historic precedent.

For those in a position to view the world as a cultural totality, it cannot be denied that certain processes of cultural convergence are under way, and that these are new processes. This last is an important point, for Hamelink is careful to acknowledge that cultures have always influenced one another and that this influence has often enriched the interacting communities – “the richest cultural traditions emerged at the actual meeting point of markedly different cultures, such as Sudan, Athens, the Indus Valley, and Mexico”. Even where cultural interaction has been in the context of political and economic domination, Hamelink argues, there has been, in most cases a “two-way exchange” or at least a tolerance of cultural diversity. There is a sharp difference for him between these patterns and modern “cultural synchronization”:

In the second half of the twentieth century, a destructive process that differs significantly from the historical examples given above threatens the diversity of cultural systems. Never before has the synchronization with one particular cultural pattern been of such global dimensions and so comprehensive.

Let us be clear about what we are agreeing. It seems to me that Hamelink is right, broadly speaking, to identify cultural synchronisation as an unprecedented feature of global modernity. The evaluative implications of his use of the word “destructive”, however, raises larger problems. It is one thing to say that cultural diversity is being destroyed, quite another to lament the fact. The latter position demands reasons which Hamelink cannot convincingly supply. The quotation continues in a way that

raises part of the problem: “Never before has the process of cultural influence proceeded so subtly, without any blood being shed and with the receiving culture thinking it had sought such cultural influence.” With his last phrase Hamelink slides towards the problematic of false consciousness. As we have seen more than once before, any critique which bases itself in the idea that cultural domination is taking place “behind people’s backs” is heading for trouble. To acknowledge that a cultural community might have thought it had sought cultural influence is to acknowledge that such influence has at least *prima facie* attractions.

This thought could lead us to ask if the process of cultural homogenisation itself might not have its attractions. It is not difficult to think of examples of cultural practices which would probably attract a consensus in favour of their universal application: health care; food hygiene; educational provision; various “liberal” cultural attitudes towards honesty, toleration, compassion and so on; democratic public processes etc. This is not to say that any of these are indisputable “goods” under any description whatever, nor that they are all the “gifts” of an expanding capitalist modernity. But it is to say that there are plenty of aspects of “culture”, broadly defined, that the severest critic of cultural homogenisation might wish to find the same in any area of the globe. Critics of cultural homogenisation are selective in the things they object to, and there is nothing wrong in this so long as we realise that it undermines the notion that homogenisation is a bad thing *in itself*. But then we enter a quite separate set of arguments – not about the uniformity of capitalist culture, but about the spread of its pernicious features – which require quite different criteria of judgement.

Engaging with the potentially attractive features of homogenisation brings us to see, pretty swiftly, the problems in its use as a critical concept. But there are other ways of approaching the issue, and one of Hamelink’s arguments seems on the surface to avoid these problems. He argues that cultural synchronisation is to be deplored on the grounds that it is a threat to cultural autonomy. I would argue against both the notion of autonomy as applied to a “culture” in the holistic sense and against any logical connection between the concept of autonomy and any particular *outcome* of cultural practices. Autonomy, as I understand it, refers to the free and uncoerced choices and actions of agents. But Hamelink uses the notion of autonomy in what strikes me as a curious way, to suggest a feature of cultural practices which is necessary, indeed “critical”, for the actual survival of a cultural community.

Hamelink’s reasoning appears to be based on the idea that the cultural system of any society is an *adaptive* mechanism which enables the society to exist in its “environment”, by which he seems to mean the physical and material features of its global location: “Different climatic conditions, for example, demand different ways of adapting to them (i.e., different types of food, shelter and clothing).” Again, there is nothing particularly controversial about this, except in the obvious sense that we might want to argue that many of the cultural practices of modernity are rather more “distanced” from the function of survival than those of more “primitive” systems. But from this point he argues that the “autonomous” development of cultural systems – the freedom from the processes of “cultural synchronization” – are necessary to the “survival” of societies. Why should this be so? Because “the adequacy of the cultural system can best be decided upon by the members of the society who face directly the problems of survival and adaptation”.

There are a number of difficulties arising from this sort of argument. First, what does Hamelink mean by the “survival” of a society? In his reference to very basic adaptations to environmental conditions he seems to trade on the idea that a culture

allows for the actual physical survival of its members. At times he explicitly refers to the physical survival of people. For example, he claims that the intensive promotion of milk-powder baby food in the Third World by companies like Nestlé and Cow and Gate is a practice that can have life-threatening consequences:

Replacing breast-feeding by bottle feeding has had disastrous effects in many Third World countries. An effective, adequate, and cheap method has been exchanged for an expensive, inadequate and dangerous product. . . . Many illiterate mothers, unable to prepare the milk powder correctly, have not only used it improperly but have also inadvertently transformed the baby food into a lethal product by using it in unhygienic conditions.

There *are* important issues having to do with the "combined and unequal development" produced by the spread of capitalism of which this is a good example. But the incidence of illness and death Hamelink refers to here, deplorable though it is, will obviously not carry the weight of his argument about cultural synchronisation affecting the physical survival of whole populations in the Third World. He cannot, plausibly, claim that cultural synchronisation with capitalist modernity carries this direct threat. It is probably true that capitalist production has long-term consequences for the global environment, thus for physical survival on a global scale, but this is a separate argument.

At any rate, Hamelink's notion of survival seems to slide from that of physical survival to the *survival of the culture itself*. But this is a very different proposition, which cannot be sustained by the functional view of culture he takes as his premise. For the failure of a culture to "survive" in an "original" form may be taken itself as a process of adaptation to a new "environment" – that of capitalist industrial modernity. A certain circularity is therefore introduced into the argument. Hamelink claims that unique cultures arise as adaptive mechanisms to environments, so he deplores heteronomy since it threatens such adaptation. But what could cultural synchronisation mean if not an "adaptation" to the demands of the social environment of capitalism?

The incoherences of this account arise, I believe, from the attempt to circumvent the problems of autonomy in cultural terms by referring the holistic view to a functional logic of adaptation. Autonomy can only apply to agents, and cultures are not agents. Hamelink seeks to bypass these problems with an argument that reduces the ethical-political content of "autonomy" to make it a mere indicator of social efficiency – the guarantor of the "best" form of social organisation in a particular environment. His argument is incoherent precisely because autonomy cannot be so reduced: in cultural terms, "best" is not to be measured against a simple index of physical survival. Things are far more complicated than this. Cultural autonomy must address the autonomous choices of agents who make up a cultural community; there is no escaping this set of problems by appeal to functionality. Hamelink gives the game away in his reference, cited earlier, to a form of cultural "false consciousness" and elsewhere where he speaks of cultural synchronisation as cultural practices being "persuasively communicated to the receiving countries".

I do not believe the appeal to autonomy grounds Hamelink's critique of cultural synchronisation. Even if it did, this would be an objection to the inhibition of independence by manipulation, not to the resulting "sameness" of global culture. But Hamelink does want to object to "sameness": this is implicit in his constant references to the "rich diversity" of cultures under threat. What are the grounds for such an objection?

Adaptation to physical environments has, historically, produced a diversity in cultural practices across the globe. However, the *preservation* of this diversity – which is what Hamelink wants – seems to draw its justification from the idea that cultural diversity is a good thing in itself. But this depends on the position from which you speak. If the attractions of a uniform capitalist modernity outweigh the charms of diversity, as they well may for those from the outside looking in, it is difficult to insist on the priority of preserving differences. Indeed, the appeal to variety might well be turned back on the critic of capitalism. For it might be argued that individual cultures making up the rich mosaic that Hamelink surveys are lacking in a variety of cultural experience, being tied, as Marx observed, to the narrow demands of the struggle with nature for survival. Cultural synchronisation could in some cases increase variety in cultural experience.

It must be said immediately that arguments exist that the *nature* of such experience in capitalist modernity is in some sense deficient – shallow, "one-dimensional", "commodified", and so on. But this is not a criticism of homogenisation or synchronisation as such: it is a criticism of the sort of culture that synchronisation brings. It is quite different to object to the spread of something bad – uniform badness – than to object to the spread of uniformity itself. This demands quite separate arguments about capitalism as a culture. [. . .]