

CULTURE SCHLOCK

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Anyone who travels abroad can see them: the outposts of our new transglobal culture. Shining like beacons of civilization amidst strange sights and exotic smells in farflung places around the globe ("They're cooking a WHAT?"), fastfood restaurants are now to be found on the Champs Elysee and in the now "liberated" satellites of the former Evil Empire.

In many cultures (including, until recently, even our own), food is equal only to sex in its symbolic and psychological significance. Now increasingly marketed as a form of entertainment and as a leisure activity, food 'products' are no longer bought and consumed primarily for their nutritional value. When eating is reduced to its literal and concrete elements, we lose one of its most vital and important functions: the opportunity it provides to commune with nature, or God, and to participate in social bonding as represented by the family meal.

Traditional cuisine, dress and rituals - the products of millennia of social development - are rapidly giving way to Big Macs, NFL sweatshirts and Kodak moments. Undermined by the appeal of all things American, people everywhere have begun to discard traditions, forces of social cohesion developed over hundreds or even thousands of years in response to unique geographical and historical circumstances - in favour of more Western, or "civilized" products and attitudes.

Despite its widespread economic and social problems, the United States remains the world's leading exporter of music, film and television, sports, food and hundreds of other consumer products. 90 percent of the television audience for the Superbowl is now watching from outside the United States. The products of Main Street USA are now available everywhere on Earth and coming soon to a tribal village near you! Identical customers ask for identical products the world over - regardless of how appropriate for the local climate or conditions.

Conceived in the laboratory of multinational corporations and nursed at the teat of the entertainment industry, the new plastic consumer culture is no longer a uniquely (North) American phenomenon. From Central Africa to the Pacific Rim, from the Indian subcontinent to South America, traditional cultures all over the world are giving way to a product-centred "lifestyle". Coke, Nike and McDonalds, the new cultural ambassadors for American-based multinationals, have helped to convert McLuhan's global village into a climate-controlled shopping mall.

Beginning just after the Second World War, American food and cigarettes, nylons and chewing gum became the recognized symbols of the sophisticate and the urbane. With a manufacturing capacity far greater than its domestic market

could support, they were ideally placed to exploit the growing foreign demand for American products - and for the cultural and individual dynamism which those products bestowed upon their users. Coupled with the resulting strength and popularity of the American dollar, the United States became an international symbol for success and prosperity - an image which soon superseded the products themselves as the principle focus of their marketing strategies.

Like eating the heart of a respected opponent, by adopting their practices and buying their products, consumers, both foreign and domestic, hoped to ingest or incorporate into themselves (or at least into their public image) the perceived "American" qualities of individualism (rugged or otherwise) and unlimited potential - an approach to marketing which became the basis of all modern advertising. Now, it is not the products themselves which we purchase, but the qualities they promise to confer or bestow.

Every product or cultural icon is a symbol of something, and every symbol embodies (and promotes) certain values. When everyone in the world recognizes and respects the same symbols of authority, when the same symbols are used to motivate people in every region on Earth, it is inevitable that we will all tend to move in the same direction. One wonders, for instance, what a child in the Third World is to learn from Barbie, from videogames, or from the characters on the multitude of North American TV shows dumped too cheaply to resist into foreign broadcast markets.

In 1993, according to the entertainment publication *Variety*, the 26 most attended films on earth were American. Responding to US pressure to remove subsidies for local film and television programming, former French Prime Minister Edouard Balladur warned that, by sending its pictures all over the world, a country has the power to spread a certain type of civilization. Now, with more than a billion television sets on Earth, it is the commercial interests of the corporate sponsors which shape and homogenize our cultural experience - and which determines both the questions we ask and the answers we will find. Conformity of dress, conformity of experience and conformity of thought permits only that which serves the interest of the multinational producer to survive.

There is a word in the Hopi language, POWAQQATSI (from Powaq, meaning sorcerer and Quatsi, meaning life) which refers to an entity or a way of life that consumes the life force of other beings in order to further its own. Like the 'Tree Farms' which replace oldgrowth forests, the new monoculture effectively supplants the diversity of adaptation developed over the ages. And once a biological species has been made extinct, its (usually vital) contribution to the local

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wisdom is replaced by infomercials for *The Good Life*, we lose its unique contribution to the forum of public debate - resulting in a restriction of the available options or the possible solutions to a series of pending global crises. In a world that shares the same celebrities and symbols of authority, we stand to lose any alternative points of view.

Our culture used to be the thing we would celebrate, or visit foreign lands to experience: increasingly it's contained in the things we buy, trading our cultural heritage for a "modern consumer lifestyle".

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