

**McCULTURE** / *The products of Main Street USA are now available everywhere on Earth. So much for the new co-existence*

## Trading tradition for lifestyle

BY RUTHERFORD

ON this page recently, President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic pointed the way to a new spirit of co-existence — evolving from within the framework of a single global civilization (Needed: A New Spirit For A New World — Feb. 28). While the spread of a common worldwide culture might be expected to improve international tolerance and co-operation, it may ultimately succeed only in reducing us all to customers for the same products.

Anyone who has travelled abroad has seen them: the outposts of our new trans-global culture. Shining like beacons of civilization amid strange sights and exotic smells, fast-food restaurants are now to be found on the Champs Elysée and in the newly "liberated" satellites behind the old iron curtain.

In many cultures (including our own, until recently), food is equal only to sex in its symbolic and psychological significance. Increasingly marketed as "entertainment" and a leisure activity, food products are no longer bought for their nutritional value. We are losing the opportunity to nourish our soul through a communion with nature 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, National Football League sweat-shirts and Kodak moments. Undermined by the appeal of all things American, people everywhere have begun to discard traditions, developed in response to unique geographical and historical circumstances, in favour of more Western, or "civilized," products and attitudes.

Despite its economic and social problems, the United States remains the leading exporter of music, film, television, sports, food and hundreds of other consumer products. (Ninety per cent of the television audience for the 1992 Superbowl watched 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 condition.

Conceived in the laboratories 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, tra-



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ditional cultures are giving way to a product-centred lifestyle. Coke, Nike and McDonald's, the cultural ambassadors for U.S.-based multinationals, have helped to convert Marshall 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 sophisticated 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 U.S. products — and for the cultural and individual dynamism the products implied. Coupled with the resulting strength of the U.S. dollar, the United States became an international symbol for success and prosperity — a symbol which soon superseded the products themselves as the principle focus of marketing activities.

**ADOPTING** their practices and buying their products, consumers, both foreign and domestic hoped to ingest or incorporate into themselves (or into their public image) the perceived "American" qualities of individualism (rugged or otherwise) and unlim-

ited potential — an approach to marketing which became the basis of modern advertising. It is not the products we pay for, 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 we recognize the same symbols of authority, when the same symbols are used to motivate us, 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 video games, or from the characters in the multitude of North American TV shows dumped cheaply into foreign broadcast markets.

In 1993, according to Variety magazine, the 26 most-attended films on Earth were American. Responding to U.S. pressure to remove subsidies for film and television programming, 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 that shape and homogenize our cultural experience — and which determine the questions we ask and the answers we will find. Conformity of

dress, conformity of experience and conformity of thought permit only the survival of that which serves the interests of the multinational.

Like the "tree farms" that replace old-growth forests, the new monoculture effectively destroys the diversity of adaptation developed over ages. Once a biological species has been made extinct, its (usually vital) contribution to the local ecosystem is lost forever.

Similarly, when a national or regional way of life is supplanted by the McCulture, when tribal wisdom is replaced by informercials for "the good life," we lose its unique contribution to the forum of public debate, restricting the available options or possible solutions to pending global crises. In a world that shares the same celebrities and symbols of authority, we stand to lose any alternative points of view.

Culture used to be the thing we would celebrate, or visit foreign lands to experience; increasingly, it is now contained in the things we buy. We are selling our cultural heritage for a consumer lifestyle.

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