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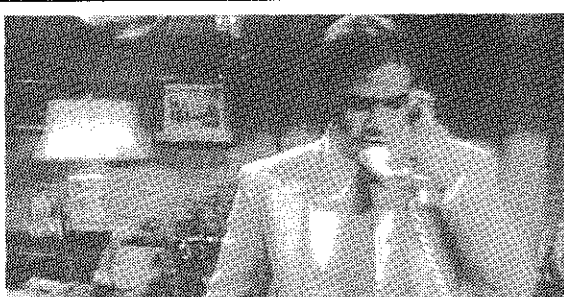
## INDUSTRIAL



## CULTURE



## BE A



## CULTURE



## OF



## DIFFERENCE?

Reflections On The  
Current Confrontation of  
France With The Model Of  
Serialized Cultural Production  
Of The U.S.

MICHELE MATTELART

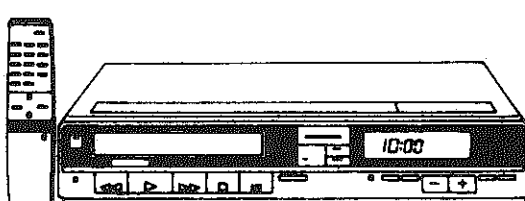
## Introduction

Michèle Mattelart is a French sociologist who does research in communications and mass culture and teaches at the University of Paris VIII. She is co-author of the recently published *International Image Markets: In Search of an Alternative Perspective*, written with Armand Mattelart and Xavier Delcourt, and published by the Comedia Publishing Group, London, 1984. Mattelart lived and worked for many years in Latin America, particularly in Chile, where she was a programmer at the national television network during the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende. It was during those years that her associates Armand Mattelart and Ariel Dorfman published the well-known *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. Michèle Mattelart's publications include books and articles on women's magazines, television, photo-novellas and feminism and culture in Latin America. In July 1982 she was part of the French government's delegation to UNESCO's international conference on culture held in Mexico City. Mattelart has also worked on many governmental agency projects, including one Gabriel García Márquez initiated in France called Interlatina, whose mandate it is to raise questions about the internationalization of culture.

The following article is extracted from a paper of the same title read at the conference 'Marxism and Culture' in Urbana, Illinois in June 1983. Excerpts are printed here with the author's permission. A longer version of this article will appear in the forthcoming *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossman and Cary Nelson, University of Illinois Press (Urbana). We wish to thank the editors for their permission to excerpt from this article in *borderlines*.

## Culture Or Economy

## In Question?



The implementation of a cultural policy linked to a reindustrialization strategy gives a new acuteness to the question of the 'American program' and of the 'serialized American production'.

The present audiovisual system is going through a serious production crisis: the development of a video products market, the launching of a fourth television channel, the inauguration of satellite direct broadcasting and the beginning of an active policy in favour of cable—all of these are creating an urgent need to foresee new contents and to encourage innovation not only in technical uses, but on the part of viewers themselves. The implementation of this conscious communications policy raises the problem of programs and services. What can be put into these new containers?

The few debates—too few we think—which this question raises are haunted inevitably by the fear that the creation of new channels will open fantastic possibilities for invasion by North American programs. The precedents offered by countries which have deregulated their television systems would be sufficient to legitimize this fear. France's situation today is no doubt extraordinary in this respect. What is less so is the possibility, since the arrival to power of a socialist government in May 1981, for the debate to get somewhere. The jubilation demonstrated by US industrialists would suffice to justify the fear mentioned above. In a recent issue of *Computer World* the satisfaction over the multiplication of networks and channels in Europe—a multiplication which implies many possible sources for the diffusion of cultural American products—was clearly expressed. 'It's good for us.' Our worry is no less than the reverse side of this interest.

This forced reference to the threat of a tidal wave of North American production clarifies what is at stake inasmuch as it evokes the influence of technical, financial and cultural determinisms which weigh heavily on a policy of communication. The North American program thus becomes the symbol of the mass-media model which the logic of the development of capital tends to implant and generalize.

These stakes can be summarized by the following questions: Will it open the way to the con-

*The shadow of Dallas hovers over any meeting where the future of culture is being discussed*

struction of a national industry of programs which, when responding to new needs, will not be satisfied with merely copying the transnational model of production represented today by the US? Will it stimulate the search for new alternatives, original means of production and diffusion? What will the ratio be between the budget for equipment and the budget for creation? How can one combine industrial logic and the social logic of group expression, of a wide base of audio-visual production, of the participation of civil society in the choice of technologies of communication and in the definitions of their use? Is there an incompatibility between a 'local' product which gathers the expression of a collectivity, thus allowing it to reappropriate its own sounds and images, and the international market? Does an international 'alternative' product as compared to a transnationalized mass culture product exist?

Fascinated, France is witnessing the tidal wave of new technologies. Such tv programs as 'La Planète Bleue' ('The Blue Planet')—in which the complete panoply of new technologies was shown to a flabbergasted audience of shepherds in a small village of the Pyrénées—gave proof of this seduction, as does the extraordinarily increasing number of articles dealing with this new 'advent' which are published by a euphoric press. We are entering into modernity. Modernity was refused us for many years for reasons which cultural and political anthropology should want to clarify. One only needs to think about the difference between France and other European countries in the matter of audio-visual equipment—tv sets yesterday, video today—which has always placed France at the end of the list of beneficiaries of these products.

If the signs of the technological prospective say 'Tilt' in our collective imaginary, and if they exert such a fascination, isn't it mostly because they reflect what modernity is—*par excellence*, American modernity? Besides, few media can resist admitting their joy at rejoining the founding myth. The first country to have written its his-



tory on celluloid, it is as if the US, under the conjugated effects of economic liberalism and media development, had always had the power to anticipate dreams of growth in this realm of the image, and the faculty made rhythmical by the self-renewal of industrial and technological mechanisms to repeat endlessly: 'I am your imaginary.'

This echo chamber could not easily resonate to the words of the French representation to the International Conference on Culture organized by UNESCO in Mexico in July 1982. Those words put into question the monopoly of the US over the means of production and diffusion of cultural goods, and once more launched the fight for the affirmation of identities and pluralities.

The unanimous polemic evoked by this speech in the French press is well known. Some spoke of chauvinistic confinement, jingoistic nationalism; others mentioned the suicidal madness of this rebellion against natural hegemony, thus fatal as well as justified. Some took advantage of this—in the television page of *Le Monde*—to mention the pusillanimity of 'French' production, and the

same struggle.' The debate has been activated lately by the fast arrival of new technologies. These key words speak the real place of the challenge. This challenge is endowed with a particular meaning in a country such as France which, up to now, has always been repelled by the thought of associating so bluntly these two terms and realities. Malraux's words, 'Cinema is an art, but it is also an industry' anticipated this realism, but in any case—was it because of the times, because of the personality or was it because it was about cinema?—his words did not seem to be understood as disrupting the way culture was thought of in France.

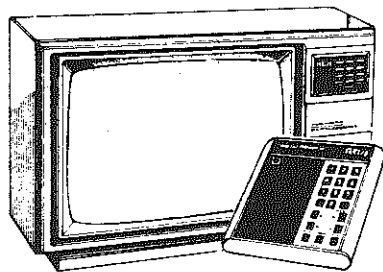
The ministerial changes which took place in March 1983 shortly after the colloquium of intellectuals—'the international of the imaginary' as it has been called—established the return to a more orthodox notion of effectiveness. Economists were called back to the seats of power and culture was pushed back.

One could foresee that things were not going to be simple. It is not in vain that the shadow of *Dallas* hovers over any meeting where the future of culture is being discussed. *Dallas*: ready-made emblem of a cultural production which must be anathematized: This is *it*. This is the indigence which we do not want. (It goes without saying that cultural indigence is meant, since in *Dallas* no one is broke!)

But while in the Sorbonne some were excommunicating *Dallas*, others were signing contracts which would renew the programming of this series in France. (TF 1 had just purchased 23 episodes.) Just when the American writer Susan Sontag was asserting that 'American culture does not have the importance they say it has', the great majority of television audiences the world over were getting ready to enjoy on that Saturday evening, as well as on other Saturdays, J.R.'s new Machiavelian plots and Sue Ellen's new torments, all of which keep on priming the prime time success of the series. Such is one of the incoherences to be mentioned, one of the contradictions to be analyzed, because it simply points to the reality of the constraints presently implied by the binomial economy/culture.

### Could The Universal Be Confused

#### With The Commercial?



In order to explain the success of tv films of North American serialized production, one would be tempted to stick to analysis of their narrative structure, their content—that is to say, to isolate oneself in these tv products in order to find the answer to the questions one has about them.

Doesn't this tendency hide the very important fact that this television product is the emanation of a particular television system which, in its turn, comes from a historical heritage? It is a system which crystallizes in its mode of organization the characteristics of its genealogy, as well as the role which it has been given in the production and reproduction of the social whole—specifically in comparison to the other apparatuses for socialization and the creation of a 'general will'.

Economy and culture. It is known that the US, where the mass media system developed from the beginning under the auspices of business, was the first to resolve this equation economy/culture and to turn it into the spearhead for the conquest of markets, thus instituting it as the trademark of universalism. Hence today in the French

*Dovjenko relates that at a certain time the leaders of Soviet cinematography produced, shall we say, 100 films and noticed that out of such a quantity, they had only found five which could be called excellent, 20 which deserved the term good, whereas 50 were mediocre and 20 quite bad. Thus, they decided with apparently the best common sense, to only produce good and excellent films in the year to come, so they reduced to 25 the total number of productions; 25 films in which all the resources and the efforts which the production of 100 would have cost were to be invested. They then noticed with surprise that out of the 25 films produced during the year, only two were excellent and good, ten were mediocre and eight bad. They thought that it was necessary to reduce the quantity even more in order to concentrate the effort on very few films and only produce the number of films which had received the qualifications of good and excellent the year before. They judged that if they limited the number of productions they would achieve masterpieces. Result: Excellent—0; Good—2; etc.*

*We shall note with interest that it is the same relation of quantity/quality, but seen from another angle, which was produced in France at the beginning of 1983 by the Union of Professional Artists and Performers, who objected to the increase of advertising on television channels. 'The interference of announcers in the programs is felt in the reduction of "free production" Advertising which gives us work on a short term basis reduces work on a long term basis. The law of public polling is the choice of a movie over a play. "Twelve Angry Men"—people will look at that and that's as far as it goes. The specificity of a tv creation where the actors could have a determining role does not interest announcers. Of course, criteria of quality are dangerous to use, but it is well-known that it is through a certain quantity of fresh production that the proper quality of audio-visual creation underlined in the text manifests itself. And the financial risk of quantity is impossible for a leadership tied to the listener ratings.*

MM

boredom it exudes. The masses were called upon to be jurors; the same masses and the daily plebiscite they constitute mobilized to defend the only culture supposed to fit the advanced industrial age. While focusing so much on the attack made against americanophilia and ambient atlantism, one thing was forgotten: a sentence, or rather a kind of programmatic order of the day, which was at the turning point of the Mexico speech before it came to be at the heart of the debate on cultural politics: 'Economy and Culture, the

## An Interview With

### Michèle Mattelart

The following conversation with Michèle Mattelart took place in July 1983, with Jody Berland, Rosemary Donegan, Peter Fitting and Alexander Wilson. Translation is by Peter Fitting.

**border/lines:** The questions you've raised in your work are central to current discussions of culture in Canada. Since a principal cultural concern in Canada has to do with our 'national identity', the question of cultural industries—media, film, publishing and recording—has become of interest to the state itself. The Canadian government has been pushed to raise questions of social concern that one does not ordinarily expect from the state. Looking at the French government's current interest in cultural policy and in American hegemony within mass culture, we wonder how this concern came about.

**Michèle Mattelart:** The question arose because Jack Lang, the French Minister of Culture, raised the issue of identities and cultural pluralities as these are confronted by US hegemony in cultural production and distribution. That was at the UNESCO conference in Mexico City in 1982. This is also a position that has been taken by the French Prime Minister. Mitterand himself used the example of film: of approximately 260 foreign films on French tv, 200 are from the United States. But film is not a very good example, for I'm afraid I prefer a good American movie to a bad French film.

Jack Lang, anyway, was almost universally condemned in the French and American press for his statements. At the same time, the political crisis in France is accompanied by the rise of 'American-ness'. The introduction of new technologies in France is legitimized by the myth that these technologies bring France closer to American modernity. I need only cite newspapers like *Libération* or *Le Monde*, whose Sunday sections argue the importance of new communications technology in terms of American modernity.

**b/I:** Like Régis Debray's comment about May '68: that the French left had started out for China and landed in California.

**MM:** Yes. This is the myth of the new California lifestyle. For a whole generation of French intellectuals, the focus has shifted from China (the Cultural Revolution, Maoism and so on) to 'American-ness'. Look at the trajectory of the journal *Tel Quel*.

But to return to the original question, the concern with American cultural hegemony did not happen because of intellectual debate or even because of discussions within political parties, but largely because of Jack Lang's rallying cry.

**b/I:** The situation in Canada is perhaps singular. We share an immense border with the US, within 100 kilometres of which most of our population lives. Most Canadians also speak the same language as Americans. The government has been reduced to establishing quotas for radio and tv—yet even this is difficult in face of the public's preference for American tv in particular.

As Canadians, we are interested and concerned not only about US cultural hegemony, but also about the way bourgeois nationalists in Canada have pre-empted the question of US cultural penetration. The Canadian left tends sometimes to adopt a nationalist position—both economic and cultural—which resembles that of bourgeois nationalism and which obscures any possibility of a critical or socialist alternative.

**MM:** I wonder if the struggle against US domination in Canada hasn't led to cultural openings toward Québec. But in any case, this isn't an issue in France. The current debate for us around American cultural hegemony is a response to the rapid penetration of new technologies. We are overwhelmed by these developments—the imminent setting up, for instance, of new tv channels. (TV is state-run in France and there were, at the time of the interview, only three channels with a total of 30 to 40 hours a day of programming—eds.)

In France our system of audio-visual production is in crisis. It is certainly possible that the new channels to be opened in

France will be filled with US programs. Look at the situation in Italy since tv (and radio) were deregulated, and the rapid emergence of private networks and stations. There are apparently more than 600 private tv stations in Italy, which in most cases fill their broadcast time, often 24 hours a day, with cheap American series. This has forced the RAI (Italian national tv) to examine and reflect on what Italy itself is producing in the way of national programming—so as to avoid the flight of capital from Italy, and to look at the ways of meeting these new demands from within. Obviously the RAI is being forced to respond to a dynamic touched off by the private stations, who have undercut the older supply and demand relationship of tv programming by switching to a programming system based entirely on **distraction**, and thus on foreign programs and series.

**bl:** Is there a positive aspect to the present (US) internationalization of culture, particularly television programming?

**MM:** Let us be very careful when we speak of internationalization. Only some programs are internationalized. We do not have in France a complete picture of American tv production. Even the largest commercial tv networks and production companies may produce programs for specific minority groups and cultures in the US. These are not the programs which are internationalized. We must be very clear about this so as not to oversimplify a very complex problem.

The phenomenon of internationalization implies a **selection** of US tv productions; but Americans themselves can watch on their tv screens programs which correspond probably much more than we realize to their own ethnic and/or cultural minority. Nor should we overlook PBS, and it is certainly not those programs which are exported. Nor should we forget US cable tv either.

Given these qualifications, let me give an example of a positive dimension to the phenomenon of internationalization. In the so-called totalitarian countries, for instance, we must recognize that the importation of mass culture can play a progressive and democratizing, indeed even liberating, role. In his book *The Alternative*, the East German Rudolph Bahro states that it was only thanks to international news reports (broadcast from the West) that the East German intellectuals learned of the debates going on within European communist parties around Eurocommunism, for instance, and that they were able to link up with groups in West Germany.

It must be recognized that mass culture has developed within a specific class society—that of liberal democracy. Democratization is an important component of mass culture: democratization in the shaping of and in access to cultural products, and even to some extent in the content of those products.

**bl:** How can we begin to think of an alternative to American production?

**MM:** What is communications anyway? My principal criticism of our reaction to this technological explosion lies in our failure to question the underlying assumptions about communications. TV is always judged, for instance, in terms of **consumption**, as something produced by others. The relationship between production and consumption itself is never questioned. What I would propose is that we begin to look at this relationship, for it seems to me that this avalanche of new technologies into France, which has for the French an enormous fascination—a fascination which stems from an idea of modernity—this new technology will come to naught unless we examine why we continue to develop the means of image consumption without even looking at communications media as a **means** of communication, as the possibility for communication.

What would this mean in practice? Some cities in France, for instance, are making plans for the introduction of cable tv based on an **interactive** model: a cable system which would be an extension of the community services provided now by the city and which would, in this case, allow communication. Ethnic and other minority groups, for instance, would have access to the interactive network.

**bl:** But won't this just become what we have in Toronto and other Canadian cities, for example, with community-access cable? There is access to a studio, but little beyond that—with the result being panel discussions and the like that are poorly produced and poorly advertised.

perspective the challenge of combining within the same discourse a will of independence from the American model and the necessity to satisfy the unavoidable imperatives of this equation.

At the time of the conquest of culture markets, a commercial system has tremendous advantage when compared to a public service system. "Merchants have no homeland." These words are not mine. They are Jefferson's, said Salvador Allende more than ten years ago while presenting the UN with the complaints of his government against the actions of multinational firms in his country, Chile.

'Merchants have no homeland,' Jefferson's words make clear the advantages of a commercial system over a public system where the penetration of the communication and culture markets is concerned. Business knows no borders. Markets have no limits. States recognize the limits of nations and the public services which function within their logic subscribe to the same recognition. The commercial norm is therefore more internationalizable than the norm of the public service system.

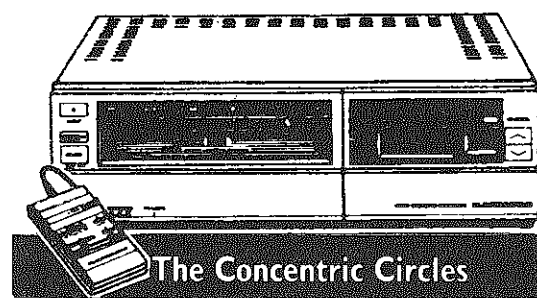
In April 1983 during the MIP TV in Cannes, the assessment of French televised products by the President of MCA Universal TV was quite revealing. It evoked the handicap faced by a culture marked with the seal of a cultural heritage which has taken the shape of a public service and has solidified a cultural connection between creation and technical reproducibility, when this culture has to cross the border of internationalization: 'In the French products that we see there is no "network appeal". The topics are generally too national, not commercial enough, also too cultural for the average US television viewer. Furthermore, we are presented with mini-series when our interest lies in standard-length series, with actors known to the general US public! At the moment we are not interested in co-productions. In two years we might talk about it again, who knows? We also need to add that we have an enormous stock of products and that we do not really need to find new ones.' To the remark made by *Le Film Français*, 'But some US channels, HBO and PBS for example, buy French series,' the President of MCA Universal TV answered: 'PBS has very little money, and HBO aims at another public. This is fine but it is not for the average US viewer.'

Here in any case is the profile of the product which stands a few chances within the strategy of internationalization as drawn by the President of MCA: an **average** product to be consumed by the **average** US tv viewer, the network tv viewer. The MCA leader was thus clearly making reference to the production of programming criteria by the commercial oligopoly, setting aside the US public channels and the type of programming through which they respond to the cultural needs of a public which is not this mass public or these massive audiences which seduce advertisers.

The problem becomes more complex today with the presence of cable networks, which should imply segmented markets. Will the production which these new networks call for be fundamentally different? One may doubt it when hearing this from the producer of *Dallas*, Lorimar, during the same Cannes festival: 'The products which we are thinking of making for cable tv must absolutely be high quality movies with real budgets and big names...Quality will have to be maintained with an eye kept on international sales.' Will these 'domestic' networks not constitute a new way of conquering the international market?

The increasing number of American series is nothing but the immediate sign of adherence to a model of television diffusion and production in which the standardized series, and especially the American series, naturally find their place; a model which in the three established functions—namely, information, education, entertain-

ment—grants an enormous predominance to the last one: **entertainment**.



The Concentric Circles

### Of Concentration

Let us get back to the aspect of **quantity**. It suggests other points. The first one, already made several times, presents the trump card of quantity in the form of stocks of available programs, already made profitable on the internal American market and thus available to national television networks at a cost much lower than that of a local production: a 55-minute series costs an average of 1,000,000 francs if it is French; 52,000 FF if it is foreign.

A second development takes us back to a trend which fits within a new and promising line of research concerning the reception of audiovisual messages, and tries to change the conception of the signifying processes of the image. This trend implies a criticism of the weight which the founding codes of analogy have exerted upon the treatment of the reception of the image. According to this new trend in research, the image does not draw its signification from reality only,

## Juneau says CBC can't afford to drop U.S. shows

OTTAWA (CP) — The CBC cannot afford to replace its popular U.S. television programs with more expensive Canadian productions, CBC president Pierre Juneau says.

"You can buy an American program, one hour, for \$35,000-\$50,000, like *Dallas* for instance, whereas these programs cost at least a million dollars now to produce per hour," Juneau said yesterday in an interview on NewsRadio.

"If we produce them in Canada we can manage to produce them at a lesser cost, but it's still much more than the cost of buying an American program off the shelf."

The CBC, for those purely economic reasons, "cannot afford to replace them," he said.

But the network will continue to try to satisfy Canadian demand for quality domestic productions like *Seeing Things*, *Charlie Grant's War* and *Gentle Sinners*, Juneau said.

"We've had for all those programs better ratings than for most of the American programs we put on," he said.

"There's so many things that separate one part of the country from the other — languages, ethnic origin, religion, distances.

"I think we must bridge those distances, and stories can do that."

It has been evident for a long time that there is a developing crisis in Canadian television, and the reasons for this crisis have been equally evident. Because of the proliferation of cable systems (now available to 75 percent of the Canadian population and in use by more than 50 percent) the Canadian audience is the most fragmented in the world. In the larger cities, viewers may have a dozen or more channels to choose from, including all the American commercial networks and the public broadcasting service, PBS. Ironically, the new Canadian stations which have been licenced over the years have added to the influx of American material.

Thus, by sheer weight of numbers, American programs dominate Canadian screens and Canadian viewing. In the fall season last year nearly two-thirds of all the television programs available in English Canada were of foreign—mainly American—origin. And English-speaking viewers as a whole spend nearly 75 percent of their viewing time watching these foreign programs. In the case of children, the proportion is even higher—83 percent.

Even French-speaking Canadians, in spite of the apparent protection of language, spend 48 percent of their overall viewing time watching foreign programs, some in translation on French channels, others on English Canadian stations or direct from the United States by cable. For French-speaking children, the figure is 56 percent.

... We are being caught up in a rapidly expanding communications technology, with attractive new opportunities for the hardware side of broadcasting: cable converters, satellite-to-cable distribution, pay television, fibre optics, cheaper earth stations, videotape and videodisc systems in the home, the evolution of the family television set into a kind of computer terminal with access to a whole range of information and entertainment choices. But the natural course of events—if it is not controlled—will be for these new distribution systems to bring Canadians an even wider selection of foreign material: American movies, American television, American sports events.

Unfortunately the events of 1978-79 did not bode well for the resolution of the crisis: the budget forecast of the CBC for 1979-80 was cut by \$71 million; the cable companies, while still pressing for pay tv, showed little sign of being willing to contribute to the production of more and better Canadian programming by and for Canadian broadcasters; and private television stations and networks did little to contribute to an increase in the range and quality of Canadian production.

CBC Annual Report 1978-79

or rather from the impression of reality; it also and mostly draws it from its relationships with other images, within a corpus which transcends them. This immense dialogue among images creates effects of exchange, and of intertextuality, whereby images maintain a system of intertextuality through reference to each other.

When Z. Brzezinski says, 'the US is the society which communicates the best,' he is no doubt unaware of the potential meaning of his own sentence. The flow of images of American series constantly rekindles the memory of the North American image industry, and thus constantly nourishes the imaginary which this industry of the image shapes.

There is in fact in the US image-industry today a development which is little different from a conscious management of the imaginary, particularly since it stimulates the memory of genres, of the genre-effect. A film like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is made as a real digest of the adventure genre. *Dallas* situates itself at the confluence of the western, the soap opera and the family saga. In its time, *Sesame Street* understood perfectly the

benefit to be derived from this reprise of all the daily propositions made to children's imaginary by television. It organized stimuli which would ensure the dramatic effect of its educational objectives. It incorporated all the genres and forms which mass culture has popularized among children: cartoons, puppets, sketches, comedies, series, commercials. The novelty, in this first industrial model of an educational series, lay precisely in the way it organized around a pedagogical model the synergy of all these genres, and the resources of this immense bank of images.

It is as if the process of concentration within the industry itself had as a counterpart a process of concentration on the symbolic level. The use of derived products and the multi-media techniques are based upon the same movement: the popular tv film refers back to the successful film; the toy or the record constantly reawakens a chain of meaning, definitively blurring the division between infrastructure/superstructure in an immense syndrome of repetition.

Need I mention that, aside from the new Japanese cartoon industry, the only industrial-cultural complex to possess the base for re-energizing the symbolic universe in the distribution network of goods is the American one? The new industry of microcomputers and video games happily dips into this huge stockpile. The French television channels have not been slow to reproduce this mechanism. A suggestive remark was made in Cannes by a New York television director about the opening of the American market to foreign products, including the French: 'The French must be willing to exploit every advantage and must remember a few essential points: they should study the American market which they want to conquer, propose a time and a finished product; avoid dubbing and sub-titles, and prefer a version done directly in English; respect the length of the American program (22 1/2 and 48 1/2 minutes) while taking into account the time for commercials which have to be inserted.'

As noted by a critic in *Cahiers du Cinema* who was recapitulating a ten-year retrospective of tv in the US (an exhibit held at Beaubourg, December 1981): 'Obviously, competition is tough and the finger of the tv viewer is fast on the knob. Every 45 seconds, the documentary changes its point of view. There is a fascinating quantitative study to be done concerning the number of changes in axis or place in American programs. I am sure that with all products taken together, one would get to a UTTB (base unit of television time) which I estimate to be approximately 45 seconds.' Could it not be said that North American television production crystallizes in its generality the law of competition?

The era of the spectacular is no doubt the main cultural instance of technological society. In our recent study of the *Sesame Street* series, we noticed how much the rhythm of commercial time was felt. This series—it has not been underlined enough—remains one of the few instances where the institutionality of mass culture was taught in order to attempt to remedy what its founders deemed to be the commercial mediocrity of this culture, the levelling effect it has. It seems, however, that they had to make use of the laws of this culture and to utilize advertising appeal as the support for new pedagogical messages—aimed in priority, let's not forget, at the children of ethnic minorities placed in disadvantageous position in the school system. Speaking of this era of spectacularity, we wrote: 'It is not only the recourse to the technical event which characterizes *Sesame Street*; it is also the propensity to re-inject into the pedagogical field all the stimuli of the universe of consumption, all its normative injunctions to the imaginary and sensory registers of childhood. Exploiting the seduction of rhythm, of diversity, *Sesame Street* mostly works by calling upon the huge stock of signs of the universe of the consumer culture, stimulating the in-

**MM:** In a free-enterprise system there is, of course, the problem that such programs must compete against well-funded network programming. How can we compete with their production values, and so on?

Let me take a concrete example. Even though we do not yet have cable in France, we will very soon; and we are aware of the Canadian experience. How could these new community networks be used in an interactive way? Women, for instance, might seek to communicate with each other by means of cable and even, within the new interactive potential of fibre-optics technology, to have someone 'watch', as it were, their children. This system would in fact be an expanded telephone, if you will.

In addition to the possible uses of this new technology, there is also the question of the expansion of the bases of production. A community could certainly decide to take upon themselves, for instance, the aesthetics of their own socialization—to dramatize and broadcast, for instance, how they feel about and understand the problems facing them as a community; and to make their own programs, aided, of course, by technicians and professionals, and with more help and funding than you mention in the Canadian experience. In France there have already been attempts within the existing system to regionalize and localize production.

**b/l:** On that score, I think we remain skeptical. Community access has been cut back and increasingly centralized. But are there in France community or political groups who are striving for more control of or access to existing media?

**MM:** We are in a period of retreat. The election of a socialist government has been followed by a serious political crisis, particularly for the left. The various groups which had organized as tv consumers' committees have even less influence and impact today than they did under the preceding government, and there is an overall decline in organizing around these issues.

**b/l:** What about the cultural producers themselves: actors, musicians, etc., and efforts to develop more access to the means of cultural production?

**MM:** Yes, to some extent. Actors, for instance, want more say—but only in terms of access to existing state-run tv. As for record production, there is a good system of small record companies who discover musicians, and then the artists go to the big companies who have a better distribution system.

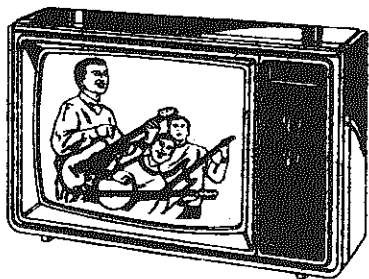
**b/l:** Is there work being done in France on the question of symbolic imperialism?

**MM:** Although we are very isolated in France, this is a part of my own work and a problem which has interested me for some time—along with the question of reception, that is, what happens in the moment of reception. The meaning which is uncovered through the analysis of a work's content may be contradicted by the response or reaction that the subject-spectator gives to that work. The whole question of reception needs looking into, particularly the reception of the image, in terms of the unexpected results which take place at or in the moment of reception. Unfortunately, very little research has been done along these lines, although there is now an area we call the socio-pragmatic of the image. Our work has already benefitted from this work, and it is doubly important insofar as it completely tears to pieces the more traditional theory of manipulation, a theory which in turn is the basis for the simplistic theory of cultural imperialism.



tegration of the child to this world. In fact, what triumphs is a modality of time determined by industrial culture: a modality based upon the artificial, a time which no longer has anything to do with the temporality of daily life, a time of record times, of the exceptional, of the spectacular. What disappears is on the one hand the temporality of daily life, the real, the duration of lived experience; and on the other hand, the rhythms specific to other cultures. This no doubt acquires its full meaning within the framework of the series, which proposes to reach ethnic minorities, children who belong to cultures other than this highly industrialized one. Fighting against segregation it gathers around them the era of technological progress, inevitably assimilated to the irreversible progress of modernity. It assimilates them, homogenizes them, agglomerates them through the effect of instantaneity, the immediacy which characterizes its learning techniques, and the culture of anticipation to which it refers. One may legitimately wonder whether the real educational message of *Sesame Street* does not reside in this initiation to the world of consumption with its modalities of mass space-time.'

The notion of *time* is central to the process of internationalization of television products. The criticism of French series, very often by the French themselves, of being too 'slow' bears witness to this fact. One realizes the weight of this obstacle when one studies the different protocols of agreement or the critical material concerning exchanges and co-productions: 'French series drag in length and langour.' But here again, it is hard to say where the defect starts and where quality begins.



### Culture As a Planetary Regulator?

There may be a tendency to stick too closely to the consideration of the importance of the American mass-media as an industrial vector. It has in fact been a fantastic nation builder. The United States was very early faced with the emergency to create universal rallying signs in order to answer to the composite nature of its population, made up of immigrants from various races and ethnic groups. This urgency has haunted them since the Civil War and the mass-media culture offers an answer. First the comic, then the western and today series like *Kojak* or *Dallas* have strongly contributed to amalgamating this national society. It is too often forgotten that the first effort toward amalgamation has the national society itself as a target. The first test, in fact, of the universal values of American programs (as well as that of their profitability) takes place within the limits of the national territory. They await the verdict of the national public, sufficiently mixed and representative. Said verdict will become the guarantee of universality.

The Italian filmmaker Ettore Scola evokes a mechanism which is complementary to the series when he judges that 'the success of a telefilm is to be attributed in the first place to the specificity of the product which contains in itself its own promotional campaign: each "episode" creates in the viewer the desire to find again and to recognize emotions already felt: not the search for novelty, but the confirmation of a habit, from the programming schedule to a narrative scheme, to the repeating of characters and actors. And autopromotion multiplies itself automatically each week.' (From the same commier-

*The need for such funding arises from the continuing metamorphosis of the environment in which programs are produced. The new technology is bringing about a proliferation of programming services, not just in Canada but around the world. This transformation of the global broadcasting environment will result in a continually growing and voracious demand for new programming to fill the multiplicity of channels soon to be available. This hunger for new content represents an enormous opportunity for Canadian program producers. But, in order to compete effectively in these new markets and in our own domestic market, Canadian program producers must have the resources to produce attractive, high-quality Canadian programming in both official languages and of international calibre—Canadian programming that people will choose to watch.*

*Towards a New National Broadcasting Policy  
Department of Communications  
Government of Canada, 1983 (emphasis added)*

cial perspective, the former director of TV Globo confirmed this idea when he explained why the *telenovelas* had such success on Brazilian channels, especially on TV Globo where they are programmed every evening at 7:00, 8:00 and 10:00: 'TV is a habit. The battle for the audience is won by anyone who succeeds in keeping and attracting again a viewer to the particular channel.'

This constant work of amalgamation is found at another level in terms of the ideological function assumed by the media: the American series are in a constant dialogue and in a vast (unequal) exchange with the preoccupations and tensions which animate civil society, reducing the contradictions, turning latent conflicts into already solved conflicts. One need only think about the 'presence' of the black problem, the problem of women, of ethnic minorities. All these are biases through which these series speak to us, call to us, find an echo in us.

A national consensus. A world consensus. Constantly watching to fill in any possible gap in the preservation of consensus, and stepping up their vigilance in periods of crisis, these series offer us symbolic answers to problems, the return to the family being the most widely insinuated remedy. These fables have a world-wide value today.

One can no longer appreciate the value of the presence of American series on the screens of the world in the terms in which we appreciated them in the early seventies. The facts and the stakes are of another importance. The arrival of the commercial series is also the arrival of the commercial mode of organization of social relations, which goes far beyond that of the organization of cultural production. It is nothing more nor less than the penetration of commercial logic into the relations of the State and civil society. The State must resort to commercials to mobilize citizens, abandoning to tv marketing techniques campaigns of general interest concerning the teaching of reading, contraception, solidarity.

A national consensus. A world consensus. This logic of privatization of all spheres of collective and individual life is the answer to the pressure inherent in the transnational mode of expansion, which desires this type of organizational power and tends to reduce public space, to eliminate anything having a connection with public function. Whatever remains an obstacle to the increasing integration of national economies in a world scheme and to the new international division of work may become the favoured target of this remodeling. (These are the forms of social control recommended by the Trilateral Commission.) The main target is without doubt the structures of the nation-state and the totality of its

institutional apparatus. These structures and apparatuses—the results of a historical heritage, in spite of the numerous contradictions which cross them—obtain in societies which live under the civic sign of a 'really existing democracy', and are moved by a collection of norms and values in contradiction with the movement toward transnationalization of economies. The production of cultural goods and transnational information carries in itself not only a cultural project, but also a new system of power. It is probably into this space made by the commercial exchange of cultural goods that the transnational logic attempts to insinuate itself in order to weaken any kind of national resistance.

And what about the forces of resistance faced with this technological and social change? The crisis of politics is evident on the right and on the left. But on the left it hurts even more, especially when (divine surprise) it has the opportunities of power. The National Secretary for Cultural Action of the French Socialist Party drew up a severe review of the situation during the Cannes Festival: 'One should not be surprised that the Left cannot, or will not, withdraw the development of the cultural industries from the influence of the market. But one may be alarmed by the enthusiasm with which it sometimes abandons them there.'

It is now official. The French Antenne 2 produced in 1984 a great *saga* in the spirit of *Dallas*. 'Conceived by two teams of scenarists, this series of 26 episodes will tell the story of a family, owner of a big daily newspaper of the regional press...' As for the fourth tv channel, promised for the near future, the decision for pay tv seems to mortgage heavily the possibility it could have offered to diversify the French industry of programming, on the one hand, and, on the other, to serve as a support of social communication—interactive communication between groups—within a wider conception of a public service. It will be difficult to program anything but programs for a wide public.

This is not the least of the damaging effects which this fascination for technology produces: this fascination leads to literally transposing onto



an American modernity now illustrated by the explosion of communication, the idea of an America as symbol of freedom and democracy. This in turn has perverted notions of decentralized interactive communication, while attributing these virtues to technology itself, and while taking for a revolution in social relations what in many cases is nothing but a new technological interface. The fact that one often forgets to mention that before being a support or a means of communication, communication is a social practice, is without any doubt one of the characteristics of the situation today.

Editor's note: Readers wishing to find sources for quotations indicated in the text are advised to consult the full version forthcoming in Grossman and Nelson, as they were not provided in the first (here reformed) translation issued in Urbana. We have taken the liberty of our own location to replace Mattelart's term 'North American' with 'American' where it seemed appropriate; we suspect she would understand.