



# IS THERE A GLOBAL CULTURE?

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The possibility of a truly global culture has become one of the most contested issues today. It is also the most questionable of the claims made by theorists of advanced capitalist or post-industrial society.

The world today is increasingly united by vast and sophisticated telecommunications and computerised mass information systems, and on a more immediate and popular basis by television and communications satellites. These are able instantaneously to bring into the living rooms of everyone who possesses a television set, images and experiences from every part of the globe. But is this power helping to overcome national divisions or does it serve to reinforce them? Are the mass media simply overlaying ethnic and national cultures with a cosmopolitan veneer, or are they actually producing a new global culture that will ultimately replace the older national cultures that divide humanity today? Is television the producer, or merely the medium, of this global culture? And what, in any case, would be the content of this global culture?

With this last question we enter a realm of speculation. But some clues can be obtained by looking at the recent phases of Western, so-called 'post-modernist' culture. Of course, post-modernism does not pose as a universal and global culture, since it denies such grand aims. At the same time, others have seen in its contours the shape of such a global culture-in-the-making. Recent Western cultural developments seem to presage such a culture by combining a streamlined scientific modernism with a pastiche of styles, motifs and subjects. This is an eclectic culture, which mixes standardised mass commodities packaged uniformly for mass consumption with the revival of earlier folk or national themes and styles. These themes and styles are wrenched from their original contexts and treated as parodies of the real thing. From Stravinsky's and Poulenc's neo-classicism (mixed with jazz elements) of the 1920s to Hockney's and Kitaj's revival of figurative art treated in a flat, whimsical manner, this pastiche of images, styles and themes suggests a post-modern and post-classical culture, that mimics the latter playfully for anti-modern ends.

The mass media have played a major role in the creation of this artificial culture of juxtaposed images, and none more so than television. Through its advertisement of mass

commodities, its prodigal portrayal of ethnic and folk images, its commitment to generalised 'human values' and quantitative science, and its technological dissemination of these elements, television has fostered the growth of a global network of cultures, which blurs the lines between their ethnic and national contents. Can we then see in television the creator of a global culture-in-the-making? And what is it creating?

Three aspects of this media-produced cultural globalism set it apart from previous cultures and cultural productions. A global culture is, in principle, universal. Unlike the most far-flung imperial culture, a cosmopolitan global culture knows no source and no frontiers. Hellenistic, Roman, Chinese, Byzantine or Islamic imperial cultures, despite their universal pretensions, were rooted in a particular ethnic milieu, a specific region and territory, with its customs, folklore, gods and languages, however ennobled. But a global culture has no roots, no habitat, no territorial identity.

A global culture also knows no period, no past, no sequence nor determinate process. It has no beginning, no development, no goal. It is here and now and everywhere. Global culture is timeless and historyless, its scientific and technical core merely decorated eclectically with folk motifs that have been quarried from a patchwork of ethnic pasts.

A global culture is artificial. It is a construct of many imaginations, composed of a myriad of instantaneous images flashed onto our consciousness by the media, but dissolving swiftly into fragments. It is a culture of irony and caprice, whose cleverly calculated effects are devoid of any passion or commitment. It is a culture of the mass media, above all of television, that medium of artifice whose solutions to human problems are essentially technical and visual, and whose intersecting systems of communication and information create uniform, passive audiences by means of carefully packaged imagery and a universal scientific and quantitative discourse.

The gulf between this memoryless global culture and all earlier cultures is profound. Earlier cultures were plural; they inhabited a world of cultures, each of them distinctive even when most interrelated. A global culture is singular; it embraces the planet. Earlier cultures were built up around the memories, symbols, myths and traditions of particular groups

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ethnic, religious, regional or class groups. A global culture, by definition, knows no separation of humanity into 'groups'. It embraces them all, indifferently. It is 'group-blind'. Earlier cultures were rooted in particular strata, courtly, priestly or popular. A cosmopolitan, global culture is 'de-stratified'. It is neither an elite nor a popular culture. Having no roots in time or place, it also has little connection with peoples, even though it is designed to appeal to 'everyone', to the 'common man', to all 'humankind'.

But the projected global televisual culture is fatally flawed at just this point. To sustain themselves, past cultures have had to possess some popular resonance, and some continuity with a perceived collective past. Cultures are not patchwork parodies of selected motifs, nor are they unrelated motifs thrown together for some visual effect. Cultures are expressive wholes, spatially particularised and historically embedded. The images that have greatest impact, that recur and are continually taken up in our cultures, are just those that have this expressive, particular and historical character - the ceremonies, monuments and works of art that bear witness to an heroic and emotion-laden collective past.

But what is popularly felt and perceived to this day is pre-eminently ethnic and national. Our cultures, images and identities are and remain obstinately plural. They speak of the distinctive imagery, the particularised emotion, the rooted experience. Of these, the most powerful are not the purely local cultures and identities, important and widespread as these still are. The most powerful are the ethnic and the national identities, images and cultures, and it is predominantly through *their* lens that we receive and interpret the many messages that flash across our screens and invade our lives. There is plenty of evidence to show that we all interpret even the most popular and accessible of our television images and dramas (from *Dallas* to *Eastenders*) in ethnic, national and class terms, according to our position in the hierarchies and relationships created by these identities and categories.

This should hardly surprise us when we recall the central role of memory in individual and social life. Without memory, no identity; without memory, no community. This is why the basic themes and motifs and styles of even a 'post-modernist' televisual cosmopolitanism are inevitably drawn from folk or national repertoires (the Western, the English costume drama, French farce, etc). Even a synthetic neo-classicism harks back, however distantly, to antique or Renaissance forbearers. But a global culture of discrete visual images produced by the mass media and information technology can only be a memory-less construct, or dissolve into its national components. As yet, there is no global 'identity-in-the-making', and any attempt to create it artificially will simply highlight the plurality of folk memories and national motifs that must be plundered to constitute this giant *bricolage*.

Neither television, nor information technology, nor literary criticism, then, can construct such a project. The idea that culture, a global culture, can be 'constructed' and then 'deconstructed' like some text that can be 'read' and unmasked, cannot be sustained. Like the visual images of

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which it is composed, this most daring and all-embracing feat of the human imagination must soon fall into its constituent parts and stand revealed as no more than a pastiche of the folk memories, myths and symbols out of which ethnic traditions and national cultures have been gradually formed. The texts which would compose this patchwork, the parodies which make up its constituent parts, take their meaning only from the historical cultures of ethnic communities and nations that set limits to our imaginations and our discourses. Even when we can grasp their power and unmask their appeal, we are not thereby delivered from them. The hold of images on our screens derives, in large part, from the cultural assumptions that are bound up with the ethnic or national milieu which gave rise to them. A stirring procession, a riot or war, a portrait of the countryside or natural history, convey their deeper meanings and exert their power over us in virtue of the regional, ethnic or national contexts which they imply or describe. For the *longue duree* of ethnic and national histories have furnished the very values, languages and cultures in which our imagery and discourses are couched; they set limits to what and how we may imagine and grasp the visual information that television conveys.

We may say, then, that television, like the other mass media, must operate within a historically defined context; and today that context is one in which national identity and ethnic community, far from withering away, is the dominant mode of human association and action. Given a world of national states and ethnic identities, the media inevitably reflect these fundamental human divisions and their cultural contours, even where they attempt to blur and overleap national differences.

The fact that we easily recognise such effects only attests to the continuing vitality of ethnic and national distinctions. Television with its packaged imagery may sometimes suggest the vision and evoke the veneer of cultural globalism, but we must not confuse an essentially illusory effect with the continuing reality of ethnic and national divisions. It is not in the power of television, or any other media, to undermine these underlying realities. It will take much else, and much stronger measures, to do so. ■