

Values sent abroad by U.S. culture said to be 'revolutionary'

The following is excerpted from remarks made Nov. 3 at a forum called "Global Fashion: American Commercial Culture in the World," sponsored by the Center for Arts and Culture. Speaking were Todd Gitlin of New York University, Jose Limon of the University of Texas, Bonnie Richardson of the Motion Picture Association of America and Charles Mann, contributing editor to Atlantic Monthly.

Mr. Gitlin: The values which this [American] culture is exporting are revolutionary values. It's a brash culture that respects no boundaries....

"When I say 'this culture,' I mean everything from movies to popcorn, to advertising, to the Internet, American popular books, magazines and celebrities and so on. All that is so forceful that it forces other cultures to cope. Nobody can ignore what's coming at them through every technical means....

"There's a demand for what America has to offer, and there's also a protest against it. It's also resisted because it's felt to be a typhoon, a force that not only is unavoidable, but destructive....

American popular music is probably our most successful export.... It's a product of many imports: imports from Africa, imports from England and Scotland and Ireland. When African-American music was transmuted into rhythm and blues in the 1960s, it was exported. One of the places it was adopted and adapted was in the Caribbean. The beat was changed, the style was modified, and it came out first as ska and then reggae, which was picked up as an export to England, where it bounced back to Jamaica and then was picked up by American musicians....

"The impact of cultural forms from the rest of the world on the United States is so far short of the volume and intensity of American exports as to make us, in a sense, the most gargantuan provincials in the world.... We are not especially interested in what's going on in the major arts in the rest of the world, peoples' literatures, the films of the rest of the world.

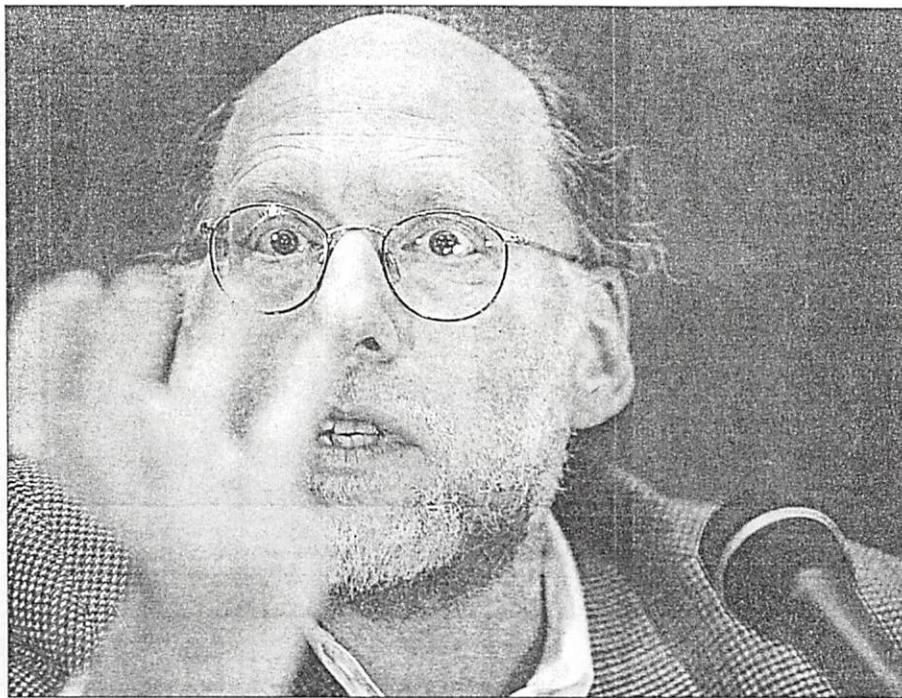
"I think the problem of American commercial culture lies in its tremendous success... that we have the perverse fact that these young, aspiring filmmakers want to grow up to be Steven Spielberg.

This, I think, is a cultural disaster.... No one will ever be Steven Spielberg as well as Steven Spielberg. We recycle endlessly the same images, the same celebrities, the same shallowness. We are the losers here."

Mr. Limon: American commercial culture is now a global phenomenon. This is not new, but the intensity of it is new. But if globalization is true, we need to allow for geographical variations.

Miss Richardson: The major players worldwide are becoming more international and more diverse. Look at Hollywood itself: Of the seven major [film companies], one parent company is Australian, one parent company is Canadian and one is Japanese. We don't look at that as a threat to our culture....

Televisa is [a] major producer of television programming and a distributor not only in Mexico, but throughout this hemisphere. You have big multiplex operators that are Belgian or Australian. You have huge Hong Kong players producing and distributing their products and picking up other products for distribution....



Todd Gitlin of New York University discusses the globalization of American culture at a panel discussion held last week at the National Building Museum. Our culture respects no international boundaries, he said.

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— Bonnie Richardson, Motion Picture Association of America

"The globalization that's happening will be a more diverse globalization than there has been in the past.

"For the longest time, we thought culture meant the stuff the aristocrats owned, the stuff we were proudest of. But culture is also the little 'c'; the everyday reflections of who we are, what we

like, how we laugh, what we find funny.

"It's the reflection of the little 'c' that's taking place on television. It's people who want to see their everyday lives validated in something funny, something entertaining, something moving.... The market is reflected by peoples' cultural desires.

Mr. Mann: "When I had grown up, I had eaten quite happily Chef Boy-R-Dee canned spaghetti and meatballs. I looked into the history of it. This was produced in the '50s as an attempt to bring Italian culture to the unwashed American masses, to bring a kind of elite European savoir faire to the West.

I had a lot of friends in Italy and I would present them with a can of this as a gift. They were stunned. To begin with: spaghetti in a can. Also, the meatball. Something from Sweden, apparently. It was absolutely not Italian. They were dazzled by this. They brought back cases to Italy to shock their friends. What happened here is that we Americans, rather than be bowled over by superior European culture, had taken elements that were there and in smorgasbord fashion had combined them into something wholly our own.... This is the essence of globalization.

"When Americans discuss globalization, it's often [in the context] of triumphalism or hand wringing. The assumption is a cultural arrogance.... These people out there are simply waiting to be knocked over or waiting with open arms for whatever we want to give them. Again and again, I see people taking what they like, shaping it to their own purposes and feeding it right back to us."

Posters aim to prevent crack babies

By Marianne Constantinou
SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

OAKLAND, Calif. — It was a small billboard, as billboards go, not even by the road and not even facing the right direction. But the message was loud and clear.

Within minutes after the sign went up in a fenced yard on the edge of West Oakland, it was angrily torn down. The sign was aimed at drug-addicted women. The offer was \$200 cash if the women got birth control.

The mission is to prevent the birth of drug-addicted babies, who too often end up disabled and unwanted, said the sponsor of the billboard, Barbara Harris, the founder of CRACK, or Children Requiring A Caring Community, a 2-year-old organization.

But to the two dozen community activists and recovering mothers who showed up at West Grand Avenue and Market Street to sing and shout in protest, the billboard was an affront to poor black women.

Miss Harris, from Orange County, and her pair of supporters from Marin County are white. The neighborhood and the demonstrators were mostly black.

"It's saying 'Neuter poor women,'" said Ethel Long-Scott, 45, head of the Women's Economic Agenda Project, an organization that deals with the politics of race and class issues.

"You are not wanted," she shouted to Miss Harris and her supporters. "Take your money and get out of Oakland. Take that to the rich neighborhoods."

But to Miss Harris, who has adopted four black children who were crack babies, her mission has nothing to do with class or race. It's about saving children, she said.

So far, 85 women in California, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Michigan have taken her up on the \$200 offer, she said. Of them, 36 were white, 34 were black and 15, Hispanic.

"The billboard shouldn't offend them," Miss Harris, 47, said. "The need for the billboard should offend them."

Under Miss Harris' program, the women get the \$200 for any long-term or permanent birth control. Of the 85 women, 59 got tubal ligations, 12 got Norplant, 10 got Depo-Provera treatments and three received IUDs.

Many of the protesters worried that women might be so tempted by the \$200 offer that they would make decisions that they would later regret.

Culture, et cetera

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