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**THE AMERICANIZATION OF RITUAL CULTURE:
THE “CORE CODES” IN AMERICAN CULTURE
AND THE SEDUCTIVE CHARACTER OF AMERICAN “FUN”**

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Abstract

Modern life in the USA is driven by four “core codes” of oppression and repression which structure a wide range of cultural patterns, from fleeting, face-to-face interactions to enduring, large-scale social institutions. The four codes (sex, class, bureaucratization, and the commodification of time) also give recognizable contours to modern American cultural rituals (participatory as well as media-constructed) and contribute to the seductive character of “fun” which these rituals typically generate. American “fun” provides short-lived, incomplete escapes from mundane routine, and simultaneously strengthens and reproduces the core oppression and repressions of everyday life.

American “fun” provides its consumers with ritual experiences which are simultaneously attractive and alienating. This double-edge feature characterizes most media-constructed and participatory rituals in the USA. Fun-producing rituals result when the “core codes” of American

life are imported into ritual events that could otherwise generate “play,” community renewal, and culturally significant releases from the oppressive and repressive dimensions of everyday life.

The Americanization of culture is everywhere accelerated when ritual culture from the USA is marketed globally. At stake here is not the simple merchandizing of “fun”, but simultaneously the mass export of the “core codes” which make “fun” ever more attractive. A paradigm example of this process is the recent opening of *EuroDisney* and its powerful combination of participatory and media-constructed rituals. In the guise of good-natured “fun” and harmless “good times,” the marketing of American ritual culture such as *Star Trek* and *EuroDisney* insidiously reinforces the predatory American “core codes” that make “fun” seductive to consumers and profitable to investors.

**THE AMERICANIZATION OF RITUAL CULTURE:
THE “CORE CODES” IN AMERICAN CULTURE
AND THE SEDUCTIVE CHARACTER OF AMERICAN “FUN”¹**

The international hegemony of American popular culture became firmly established early in the twentieth century. For example, in 1930, Jane Addams, the American sociologist who headed the social settlement Hull-House in Chicago and who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931,² recalled being introduced to a man in Tokyo. The man did not know about her decades of work for peace, but he did recognize Chicago from its image in American movies: “Chicago,” he said, “oh yes; that is where they pursue the thief over the tops of roofs.”³

Forty years later, in 1972, the first author reports a similar experience. Deegan was then a doctoral student at the University of Chicago who traveled in Germany on vacation. On several occasions when she was introduced in Germany, men pointed their fingers as if holding up imaginary pistols and said knowingly “Chicago, bang! bang!.” The widespread export and the joking familiarity with the Chicago gangster image⁴ around the world is, of course, but one of myriad examples of the international Americanization of culture during the twentieth century.⁵

We begin this paper, however, by noting that the long-established pattern of American cultural influence is changing in several non-trivial ways. First, the modern cultural scene is witness to many new forms of media, including cassette tapes and dual-tape deck boom boxes, VCRs and

¹ Presented at Conference ‘92: The Americanisation of Culture, University of Wales, Swansea, 15-18 September, 1992.

² Deegan, 1988.

³ Addams, 1930: 819.

⁴ The equally serious proliferation of violent crimes in other cities, for example: Detroit, New York, and Washington, DC, has done little to displace the enduring media image of Chicago as the crime capital of the USA.

⁵ We were struck, for example, to note (during our 1980 visit) the numerous instances of American cultural influence in Cuba despite the general anti-American stance of the Cuban government (Deegan 1981; Hill 1981, 1983).

music videos, compact discs, FAX machines, multi-media home computers, and cable and satellite television channels, that together accelerate the mass global distribution of cultural goods. One result is the rapid, international proliferation of new music and dance styles.⁶ Second, the USA is now a debtor nation. American capital no longer controls significant sectors of the ostensibly American mass media industry. Third, many nations are producing and promoting their own forms of mass media, thereby contributing to international culture and creating new markets. Fourth, modern—or what British sociologist Anthony Giddens calls “hyper-modern”—societies are generating cultural artifacts that are increasingly divorced from traditional worldviews.⁷ In sum, the technological, economic, international, and social contexts in which we speak today about “the Americanisation of culture” are significantly altered from what they were only two decades ago when friendly Germans greeted Deegan with stereotypical references to Chicago gangsterism.

The American culture industry is, however, responding to these changed circumstances. Specifically, the USA creates images, symbols, and experiences that are (we think, perniciously) adapted to the world-wide alienation, repression, and oppression generated by modern situations. Recent American exports continue the global diffusion of distorting cultural imagery that Jane Addams noted in 1930, but that process has been transformed to meet the economic realities of the 1990s.

American culture is marketed on a capitalist basis, as in the past, but Americans are losing control of the global market, both as consumers and producers. In response to this transformed market, the cultural products of the American mass media now combine patterns of structural inequality with inauthentic experiences to generate what Deegan calls “fun.”⁸ The marketing of “fun” is big business and the American mass media industry is particularly well-positioned for its

⁶ For example, analysis of “the Americanisation of culture” must also take account of the simultaneous Latinisation and Africanisation of American popular music.

⁷ Giddens, 1990.

⁸ Deegan, 1989.

exploitation. But, there is more at stake here than profits and the hegemonic export of cultural imagery. The juxtaposition and packaging of everyday inequality with “entertainment” creates a powerful allegiance to complex forms of modern social control to which we take critical exception.

In the remainder of this paper, we first outline a theory of contemporary American “fun” that we call “the Americanization of ritual culture.” It is our view that cultural analysis must proceed theoretically as well as empirically. We then present US and European case examples of the merchandising of “fun” in the Disney “amusement package.” Finally, we return briefly to our discussion above, underscoring the deep changes in the economic structure of the American mass media, and conclude with our assessment of the potential for an international and more liberating world culture as an alternative to the incorporation and spread of structural inequalities presently championed by the global marketing of “fun.”

THE “CORE CODES” IN AMERICAN CULTURE AND THE SEDUCTIVE CHARACTER OF AMERICAN “FUN”

Modern life in the USA is driven by four “core codes” that structure a wide range of cultural patterns, from fleeting, face-to-face interactions to enduring, large-scale social institutions.⁹ The four codes are: sex, class, bureaucratization, and the commodification of time. In particular, these codes give recognizable contours to modern American cultural rituals.

American rituals are found today in two major forms. One variety is a participatory ritual involving everyday people in its performance. Examples include ice cream socials, church dinners, amateur sporting events, picnics, poker parties, community dances. The other type is a media-constructed ritual involving professional performers supported by corporate patterns of control, marketing, and funding. Examples include music videos, fan magazines, television series, films, albums. Combinations of these types are particularly potent and capable of generating considerable

⁹ Deegan, 1989.

frenzy, eg., rock concerts, professional sports matches, Star Trek conventions, and— importantly— Disneyland.

American rituals of both types are intended to be part of leisure life and, therefore, they are seen as less serious than work. They generate a typical experience called “fun.” Fun, we argue, is a product of modern society. Specifically, fun emerges from enjoyable experiences that are generated in contexts of discrimination and technological control.¹⁰ Fun has the appearance, but not the reality of playfulness.¹¹ Fun, as Deegan states elsewhere:

allows the individual to be partially incorporated in the group and because of the presence of considerable alienation, this partial tie is strongly held and defended. “Good times,” the events associated with fun, maintain inequality and alienation because they create the appearance of an escape from these very problems.¹²

This attachment to a partial release from everyday life is “seductive.” Alienated individuals feel that “good times” are necessary because these situations feel so much better than everyday life. Thus, alienated persons insist on the perpetuation of “fun,” and they are highly resistant to any critique of the structural inequalities incorporated in the processes that generate their “good times.”

“Fun” in the USA is considered a dimension of private life and is, therefore, insulated from public control or critique. Because “fun” is one of the few alternatives to work in the USA, and because it generates partially enjoyable experiences, it is strongly defended by everyday people. The seductive character of “fun” emerges from its predictable capacity to generate short-lived, incomplete escapes from mundane routine. In the process, it simultaneously strengthens and reproduces the core oppressions and repressions of everyday life.

¹⁰ Deegan, 1989: 26.

¹¹ Deegan, 1989: 28.

¹² Deegan, 1989: 26. It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper to detail the ways in which common and often highly-valued participatory rituals, including such apparently innocuous events as ice cream socials, church dinners, amateur sporting events, picnics, poker parties, and community dances in the USA typically celebrate the core codes of oppression and repression. For discussion, see Deegan (1989).

American “fun” provides its consumers with ritual experiences that are simultaneously attractive and alienating. This double-edge feature characterizes most media-constructed rituals in the USA. Fun-producing rituals result when the “core codes” of American life are imported into ritual events that could otherwise generate “play,” community renewal, and culturally significant releases from the oppressive and repressive dimensions of everyday life. Indeed, this mechanism has progressed so far that the delightful liminal joy of undifferentiated “play” that is not structured along sex and class lines, or unbounded by temporal precision or bureaucratized rules for “scoring,” is a puzzlement to many, if not most Americans. The increasing pressure to “have fun” in American society has all but pushed genuine “play” to the peripheries of experience.

The new Americanization of culture is everywhere accelerated when fun-generating ritual culture from the USA is marketed globally. At stake here is not the simple merchandizing of “fun,” but simultaneously the mass export of the “core codes” that make “fun” ever more attractive. Remember, to “have fun” American-style is concurrently to acknowledge the everyday validity of the core codes that give “fun” its experiential meaning. A paradigm example of this process is the recent opening of *EuroDisney* and its powerful combination of participatory and media-constructed rituals.¹³ In the guise of good-natured “fun” and harmless “good times,” the marketing of American ritual culture such as *EuroDisney* covertly reinforces the predatory American “core codes” that make “fun” seductive to consumers and profitable to investors.

EURODISNEY IS NOT ENJOYABLE BUT IT SURE IS FUN

Eurodisney is generating considerable public debate in France.¹⁴ This controversy results in part because Eurodisney differs from prior forms of the Americanization of culture that have been

¹³ Elsewhere, Deegan calls such combinations a “ritual collage” (Deegan, 1989: 154-155).

¹⁴ See, for example, the report on “Farmers Protest at Euro Disneyland” in the *Chicago Tribune* 1992.

incorporated into the European experience. The past history of the Americanization of culture in Europe primarily involved media-constructed rituals. Eurodisney, however, combines the powerful mass media of Disney films with the participatory ritual experienced by Americans in similar Disney-defined “theme parks” in the USA. The Disney experience is rooted in modern ritual and specifically responds to the alienation rampant in American life. This results in huge profits. The Disney enterprise maintains capitalist control over rituals that are not playful for children or for parents.

A timely article in the *Chicago Tribune* by Eileen Ogintz¹⁵ illustrates the problematic nature of the Disney ritual. Ogintz is a mother who recently traveled with her husband and three children to Disney World in Florida. She discusses the American Disney experience in terms of “tips” she learned for surviving the episode. Her first “tip” is that the ordeal is not relaxing; her second tip is that it is expensive--costing more than (US) \$400.00¹⁶ four-day passes for a family of four. Ogintz literally calls the trip “fun” and writes:

Keep reminding yourself that you’re there to enjoy. That’s what I kept reminding my husband as we waited in line for 30 minutes to ride a three-minute attraction, stood watching a parade in the rain and shelled out money for everything.¹⁷

Meals, lodging, and souvenirs are additional. Ogintz notes that it costs (US) \$120.00 for a meal and tickets to the Hoop-De-Doo Theater, and (US) \$34.00 for a bland breakfast served by Ogintz to her increasingly sullen children. Ogintz writes that she does not want to repeat the experience, but—importantly— *her children do*. Thus, she concludes with pseudo humor, it was “worth it.”

¹⁵ Ogintz, 1992.

¹⁶ At the time of writing, this amount is roughly equivalent to 200 pounds sterling.

¹⁷ Ogintz, 1992: 8.

Why was such an expensive and clearly unenjoyable experience “worth it” to Ogintz and millions of other Americans, and Japanese, and soon millions of Europeans?¹⁸ This is the conundrum we wish to understand and to partially explain through the theory of core codes. In sum, we conclude that the “Disney experience” is characterized by class codes, bureaucratization, sexism, modern use of time, and, of course, the “fun” that is intrinsically alienating yet seductive.

EuroDisney is an important target for social protests and for study by scholars because it is an American vision funded by American dollars and an imported, composite of participatory and mass media rituals. Such “pure” American products and commodities are, however, rare in contemporary society—our next topic of discussion.

THE CHANGING MYTH OF THE AMERICANIZATION OF CULTURE

Most “blockbuster” American films, with big stars, multi-million dollar funding, and huge box office receipts, are no longer simply American media-constructed rituals. They emerge from an international marketplace; celebrity roster; and combination of writers, directors, and producers. They are intentionally made for a global market.¹⁹ They appear to be American, but this is often a dramaturgical presentation of an American ritual.²⁰ In other words, these new films present the “front” but not the substance of an American ritual.

Even indigenous American rituals, like rap music, are rapidly transformed by their appearance on an international stage. Thus many music industries in different countries have transformed rap music into their own musical style and presentation.

¹⁸ See Borcover (1992) for a discussion of European workers’ quick adaptation to EuroDisney employment expectations and conditions, including dress codes and corporate behavioral norms.

¹⁹ For an astute discussion of intentionality in social action, see Schutz (1967 and 1971).

²⁰ For an explication of the dramaturgical model as well as Erving Goffman’s approach to “presentation,” see Goffman (1959).

There are some American rituals, however, that are becoming international while remaining in American corporate hands. For example, the “fast food” industry and the subsequent “McDonaldisation” of food is transforming eating habits, diet, and social interactions throughout the world. The “fast food” ritual has the potential to change numerous personal, participatory rituals such as birthdays, holidays, and family dinners, as well. Yet even this “American” ritual is expanding through aggressive marketing by international corporations. The pre-packaged “fast food” experience is part of a process that is no longer “American” per se, it flourishes in market-driven economies uncontrolled by any one government or culture. It is hypermodern life at its most frightening peak.

The French now suffer from the successful structure of the American “package” of creating films. In 1983, the French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, instituted a series of social changes to fight the overwhelming power of the American cinema in France. Lang fostered establishment of two production units, now called Ciby 2000 and Studio Canal-Plus. These “businesses,” controlled and funded by the French, are now so successful, however, that independent film makers and directors in France fear their indigenous powers in the cinematic industry.²¹

Finally, in an increasingly non-traditional world, rituals have no fixed ownership or control by everyday people. These rapidly transformed products are in many ways culturally anonymous. Any modern or modernizing society can use them, change them, or discard them with relative ease. An example of this flexibility is seen in a recent craze in Japan over the television series “*Twin Peaks*.” We briefly summarize this phenomenon.

“*Twin Peaks*” was a recent American television series with a complicated, mystical plot and unusual (for American TV) characters. David Lynch, the producer, director, and sometimes author of the series presented his view of small-town life in America as secretive, sexually degenerate, violent, and bizarre beneath an appearance of natural beauty, serenity and friendliness. This view of American life was wildly popular for a short period of time, but audience support increasingly

²¹ Chutrow, 1992.

dwindled after a year. One of the frequent images in the series was the cyanotic, murdered, plastic-wrapped corpse of a young woman, Laura Palmer. The series' thematic question was "Who killed Laura Palmer?"

This now cancelled television series has been made into a movie, funded by France's Ciby 2000 (Chutrow 1992). The film was released first in Japan in mid-May, 1992, and was selling strongly three months later. This success emerged from the highly successful marketing of the television series on pay television in Japan that has shown the entire series six times and sponsored a 26 hour marathon showing all episodes in one sequence. Videotapes of the series sell for \$440 apiece, and 15,000 copies have been sold. Long queues are generated to obtain rental copies. Favorite foods used on the show, expensive trips to the U.S., fans of the series' actors, and macabre photographs of young Japanese women wrapped in plastic and posing in coffins are further signs of the "*Twin Peaks*" mania.²²

This Japanese phenomenon is particularly hard to explain because, according to a leading Japanese film critic Makoto Takimoto: "I don't think, generally speaking, that David Lynch's view of the world fits into Japanese feeling." Makoto does not understand how this situation emerged. We, however, have an explanation: the seductiveness of "fun." Japan is a society that retains a mixture of traditional and modern ways. Modernizing patterns, however, are dramatically changing Japan, nonetheless. American mass-media rituals, and fast foods, are providing patterns of behavior that are simultaneously attractive and destructive of traditional Japanese society. Such massive uprooting of social values will continue throughout our increasingly global society. These changes, however, can be liberating instead of destructive. It is the potential for a new liberating ritual world that we discuss next.

²² Pollack, 1992.

LIBERATING RITUALS AND THE WEAVING OF A NEW, GLOBAL RITUAL TAPESTRY

The proliferation of new forms of mass media, funding, travel, and cultural visions need not remain tied to structural inequality and the experiences they generate. Playfulness abandons the repressions and oppressions of the American core codes. We can learn to play with new possibilities and visions on a global scale. The new world and consciousness is international.²³ We see this new vision with the emerging potential of the European Community, the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc and the former Soviet Union, and even, to a degree, the global “blockbuster” phenomenon. Satellite radio and television are also exciting new tools.

What is needed to foster this world community are structural patterns that control and limit the destructive core codes embedded in American rituals and fun. This conference is an exemplar of such an intent and its realization. We are gathered from many different countries. We have various backgrounds and training, language skills, and values. We share a common belief in rational action, communication, and the human power to critique and resist destructive cultural patterns. We also celebrate the power and potential of cultural meanings, including American culture and its scholarly study. We did not come together with one political agenda or answer, but we share great common interests nonetheless. Our very presence here is a tribute to the possibility of a new international playfulness and search for meaning in our chaotic world.

Emancipatory rituals generate community bonds, shared experiences that reveal our shared lives. Emancipatory rituals play with everyday structures. They allow us to laugh at ourselves, disregard our divisions, and enact topsy-turvy rules . . . Ideas controlled by the people and enriched by their creative energy and technological skills can yield new forms of celebration that learn from the past, build a meaningful present, and generate anticipation of a joyful future.²⁴ This new world

²³ Deegan, forthcoming.

²⁴ Deegan, 1989: 161.

requires hope and leadership; resistance and creativity; scholarship and action. It is clear that collectively we can create alternative futures and optional cultures.²⁵ A portion of this possibility is revealed in our work here: an international voice for the possibility of a world we neither knew in the past or can foresee in its future outlines.

CONCLUSION

American culture is a powerful, but flawed force throughout the world. Its influence in the film industry has flourished for most of this century. Significant, recent changes in this process have emerged due to the many new forms of mass media, the debilitating financial losses of the USA in the 1980s and 1990s, the increasing power of nations everywhere to create their own contributions to mass media, and modernity has generated cultural artifacts that are increasingly divorced from a traditional worldview.

Recent cultural commodities and experiences exported from the USA, or ostensibly from the USA, have led to considerable debate, consternation, and profits. Here we advance the argument that American rituals incorporate oppressive and repressive core codes amidst problematically enjoyable experiences called “fun.” The power of combining structural discrimination and “fun” in these situations must be increasingly understood and resisted, both within the USA and elsewhere. By contrast, “emancipatory” rituals embracing an international horizon are within the reach of all peoples. We recognize and support this human potential at this conference and in the future.

²⁵ Giddens, 1987.

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