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'Welcome to my Malibu Dreamhouse': How has the celebrity house tour served as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism?

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Abstract

This research delves into the phenomenon of celebrity house tours, a cultural practice deeply rooted in American media production. Tracing its origins back to Jackie Kennedy's iconic White House tour in 1962, this study explores the evolution of celebrity house tours, noting their proliferation in popular culture through shows such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *MTV Cribs*, and Architectural Digest's *Open Door* web series. While primarily an American phenomenon, the allure of celebrity homes has transcended borders, exemplified by the global success of such series. Against the backdrop of late capitalism's housing affordability crisis, the global fascination with idealised domestic spaces prompts an inquiry into the phenomenon and its potential role as a tool for U.S cultural imperialism. Drawing on postmodernism and Herbert Schiller's concept of cultural imperialism, I focus on the celebrity house tour as an export of the so-called American Dream, emphasising consumer capitalism and individualism as foundational elements. My analytical framework incorporates hyperrealism, Gramscian common sense, and Mark Fisher's capitalist realism within a loosely post-Marxist perspective. My central argument posits that celebrity house tours function as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism by constructing a hyperreal image of the celebrity home as a representation of the American Dream. This curated image, laden with contradictions, is disseminated globally, reshaping cultural landscapes and marginalising alternative ideals. This paper details this argument by examining the hyperreal nature of celebrity house tours, followed by an exploration of the roles played by both the celebrity and the home in constructing and perpetuating this narrative. Ultimately, I shed light on the impact of such representations on our global cultural landscape, contributing to the pathological inability to envision alternatives to capitalism's destructive dreams and desires.

Keywords: *celebrity studies, post-Marxism, cultural imperialism, Gramscian theory, capitalist realism, hyperrealism*

Introduction

The celebrity house tour, a phenomenon in which celebrities perform a filmed 'tour' of their home, has an entrenched place in American cultural production. The earliest example comes from Jackie Kennedy's tour of the White House in 1962, which was broadcasted to over eighty-million viewers globally (O'Donnell, 2012). Since then, two more United States (U.S) presidents have appeared on iterations of the celebrity house tour: Donald Trump (Oppenheim, 2016) and Joe Biden (Architectural Digest, 2023). Examples of the celebrity house tour in popular culture have proliferated, with TV shows such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* (1984-1995), MTV *Cribs* (2000-2010, 2021-present) and most recently the online series Architectural Digest's *Open Door* (2018- present). It seems to be an American phenomenon – the only notable exception being Architectural Digest India's *Open Door* series.

In an era of capitalism where housing is increasingly unaffordable (Smith, 2022), the continued popularity of content centred on utopic domestic spaces (Finger, 2021) raises questions on why they are so popular, and how, being chiefly an American production, they may serve as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism. In my paper, I employ Herbert Schiller's (in Mirrlees, 2015: 6) formulation as a basis for my conception of U.S cultural imperialism, that is American media's "coercive and persuasive agencies, and their capacity to promote and universalise an American 'way of life' in other countries without any reciprocation of influence" (2015: 6) However, I tweak this definition slightly, focusing on the significance of the American 'dream' rather than 'way of life' (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1991: 95). The American Dream is understood here as the myth of meritocracy within a capitalist system that centres individualism and consumption (Lewallen et. al., 2016: 257). In this direction, I employ a synthesised array of analytical concepts including hyperrealism, the Gramscian notion of common sense and Mark Fisher's (2014) concept of capitalist realism within a loosely post-Marxist framework.

Through these concepts, and a consideration of the American Dream as a defining feature of U.S cultural imperialism, I find that the celebrity house tour has served as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism by constructing a hyperreal image of the celebrity home as a representation of the American Dream. This image and the contradictions it embodies serves to justify obscene levels of consumption, for both the celebrity and audience. This image is then exported globally, displacing the significance of ideals (i.e. guiding principles, values and goals that are essential for the betterment of society) within the global cultural landscape (Boorstin, 1992: 181). This is significant because it marginalises space for imagining alternatives to destructive dreams and desires propagated by capitalism (Smith and

Beal, 2007: 104), to the point it has become a pathological inability (Fisher, 2014). I detail this argument by expanding on the hyperreal nature of the celebrity house tour before respectively examining the role of the celebrity and the home within this construction.

Hyperreality: displacing ideals with image

The key way in which the celebrity house tour phenomenon has served as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism is through its hyperreality, which serves to displace the significance of ideals in the global cultural landscape through the export of a privileging of ‘image’ – centred here around notions of celebrity authenticity – serving to reinforce alienating visions of consumerist capitalism as the ‘only option’. Hyperreality is outlined most prominently by Jean Baudrillard (in Hall, 2022: 116), as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” — a condition of our postmodern society. This is strongly applicable to the celebrity house tour, which relies on a hyperreal construction of celebrities’ homes. For example, many episodes of *Cribs* featured celebrities passing off houses or items as their own that were rented as props (Smitheram et al., 2017: 383). For example, rapper Redman revealed he was pressured by the producers of *Cribs* to rent an apartment for his episode in 2001, which he refused to do (2017: 383). Another example from *Open Door* was when actress Dakota Johnson disclosed the bowl of limes she pointed out in her house tour, claiming to “love”, was actually set dressing (Rosa, 2021). Although consumers are generally aware of the ‘embellished’ nature of reality entertainment (Stevens, 2022), the way in which the celebrity house tour reflects a postmodern “implosion” of the distinction between “real and simulation” (Baudrillard in Storey, 2018: 209) reinforces a pathological incapacity (Baudrillard in Hall, 2022: 116) within viewers to acutely differentiate between real and fake. Therefore, ‘fact or fantasy, image becomes the thing’ (Boorstin, 1992: 197), overshadowing reality and displacing ideals (1992: 197).

The openness with which celebrities reveal the ‘secrets’ of the celebrity house tour shows that hiding the constructed nature of the tour is not important. In fact, revealing it can reinforce the celebrity’s popularity by signalling ‘authenticity’, defined as a “successful balancing act of privilege and mundanity” (York, 2020: 5). For example, Dakota Johnson’s episode of *Open Door* is one of its most watched, with over twenty-seven million views (Architectural Digest, 2020). In the postmodern era, this tension “intensifies the seductiveness of the consumer’s search for—and constructions of—what that mask is purported to hide: the person “behind” the persona” (York, 2020: 5).

This 'authentic image' within the hyperreal sphere is important in reinforcing the celebrity house tour as a mechanism in U.S cultural imperialism because, as Daniel J. Boorstin (1992: 196) argues, it is reassuring for the consumer to find out how a corporation has tried to attract them. It signifies that to the consumer the corporation "cares" and that "he [sic] is not really being deceived" (1992: 196). Boorstin's analysis here is of advertising but given the ability of celebrities to "shape people's ideas, interests, everyday needs and desires by the means of mass adulation, identification and emulation" (Nayak, 2020), it is applicable here. Furthermore, shows such as *Open Door* are argued to be "little more than celebrity real estate marketing" (Finger, 2021) with roughly one-third of episodes coinciding with the house being listed on the market (2021). In addition, each episode's YouTube description contains a list of links to websites where one can buy items featured. Johnson's revelation of the 'fake limes' signals how the "seducers appeal is increased by disclosing [her] arts" (Boorstin, 1992: 196). Boorstin (1992: 242) directly links these seductive powers of the "synthetic image" to U.S cultural imperialism, arguing that American mass media has enabled people "who have never heard of American ideals, and who do not know whether [they] have any ideals" (1992: 241) to be flooded with American images of consumerism and individualism. In doing so the celebrity house tour emphasises a "self-centred existence" (Petras, 2000), "dissociating people from their cultural roots and traditions of solidarity, replacing them with media created needs" (Petras, 2000).

Conceptualising U.S cultural imperialism as 'flooding' is useful because it signifies how American mass media continues to shape our cultural landscape by drowning space needed for imagining alternatives to capitalism. As Fisher (2014) posits in his conception of capitalist realism, simply described as the "pervasive atmosphere' of capitalism" (2014: 16), it is now "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (2014: 1). Furthermore, Mel van Elteren (2003: 183) argues that this reveals the need to go further than conceptualising U.S cultural imperialism in simplistic terms such as the 'homogenisation of cultures' or the 'adoption of the dominant ideology'. Rather, U.S cultural imperialism represents a "victory of mood over moral structure" (van Elteren, 2003: 181), image over ideal, in which "culturally impoverished social imagery" has a pathological effect in "crowding out the cultural [and psychosocial] space for alternatives" (2003: 181). Therefore, by engaging with the celebrity house tour through a post-Marxist reading, I find that the hyperreal image is central to how the celebrity house tour serves as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism.

Contradictions: celebrity as the American dream embodied

This centrality of hyperreal imagery can be further explored by examining the celebrity house tour as a performative, hyperreal display of the ‘winnings’ of the American Dream. In examining the role of the celebrity, I find this phenomenon must be situated within the wider production of the celebrity as an “idol of consumption” (Löwenthal in York, 2020: 4) and as a specific product of capitalism (Morin in 2020.: 12).

American celebrities, linked to the global dominance of American mass media (Said, 1994: 291) have become worldwide names at a rate dizzyingly higher than celebrities from other countries (Shamshian, 2019). This is reinforced through the celebrity house tour, where glimpses into the normally private space of the home (Smitheram et al., 2017: 378) serve as an “instrumental or commodified form of social bonding with fans” (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016: 250), through the celebrity’s performative construction of a ‘real life’, authentic self (2016: 258). The para-social relationships constructed by this serve as a vessel for the perpetuation of the falsehood of meritocracy embodied by the American Dream, further reflected through the way *Cribs* focused on ‘self-made’ celebrities, particularly those who appealed to youth culture, such as rappers and sports-stars (Smitheram et al., 2017: 378). As Daniel Harris (2010: 15) reveals, celebrities on *Cribs* “continuously remind us of where they came from”, reinforcing a “pathology of idol worship” centred around the American Dream (2010:15).

Notions of ‘authenticity’ in relation to the American Dream are also reinforced by the latest iteration of celebrity: the social media ‘influencer’. In an era where the phrase “nepo baby” (Jones, 2022), critically denoting a celebrity who comes from a background connected to the celebrity industry, has become globally widespread, the ‘influencer’, who has relied on “grassroots subject construction” (Marwick in York, 2020: 14) to achieve their stardom, has become the newest ‘authentic’ ambassador for the belief that “anyone can make it” (Walia, 2020). This genre of celebrity has also been inducted into the celebrity house tour circus (Le, 2023). For example, Emma Chamberlain (2024), an influencer with over twelve million subscribers on YouTube, is featured in an episode of *Open Door* that was viewed over ten million times (Architectural Digest, 2022). Not only do these celebrities act as ‘living proof’ of meritocracy but quantitative research in this area also reveals a strong correlation between high levels of materialism and a heavy celebrity media diet (Lewallen et al., 2016). Compounded with the use of influencers as marketing tools, this further reflects their relationship to consumerism. Additionally, the global popularity of *Cribs* (only 20% of its viewership came from within the U.S (Smith and Beal, 2007: 105)) combined with the international recognition of many of the celebrities featured, such as Snoop Dogg (MTV Vault,

2020), reveals the necessity of this critique of the American Dream to be considered part of a wider critique of U.S cultural imperialism.

Stardom is “patterned after the American Dream” (Dyer in York, 2020: 4) but it is also organised around notions of “specialness and ordinariness” (2020: 5). The celebrity image therefore further embodies the hyperreal tension between real and fantasy by embodying the contradiction between beliefs in a celebrity’s simultaneous familiarity and distinctiveness. Here, what is important is “the fact that many audiences are not in the least bothered by the apparent contradiction of the two” (2020: 4). This embodiment of contradiction reflects how “[e]ntertainment as it is understood by capitalist mass culture tries to reconcile everything – work with leisure... body with soul, production with consumption” (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1991: 76). In their canonical analysis of Disney’s role in U.S cultural imperialism, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (1991: 76) argue that this contradiction cannot be simplified as a “li[e]”, rather a capture of reality then returned to the viewer “veneered with innocence” (1991: 76). By appropriating the desire for a better future, “symbols uprooted from reality” (1991: 77) such as the celebrity and celebrity house tour serve to make innocent manufactured needs and desires linked to the American Dream, such as the ownership of private property (Smitheram et al., 2017: 379) and self-made individual success. This paradigm allows the consumer to whitewash their own contradictions (Dorfman and Mattelart, 1991: 76) and pacifies genuine criticism of obscene wealth, helping to explain the seemingly contradictory proliferation of the celebrity house tour at the same time as a growing consciousness of the illusory nature of the American Dream. For example, by targeting young people through a focus on celebrities’ hyperreal ‘Peter Pan’ lifestyles (Smith and Beal, 2007: 115) and “incorporating an urban culture that includes Blackness” (2007: 105), *Cribs* perpetuated what Robin D.G Kelley (2002: 7) critiques as a widespread attitude in Black youth during the early 2000s that ““getting paid” and living ostentatiously was the goal of the Black Freedom Movement”.

Therefore, the contradictions embodied by the hyperreal celebrity image have allowed the celebrity house tour to serve U.S cultural imperialism by reinforcing the hegemony of hollow images of consumerism and individualism that shape dreams and desires on a profound level, to the point where we globally share a “reflexive impotence” (Fisher, 2014: 21) to imagine visionary ‘post-capitalist’ alternatives built on collective ideals (Petras, 2000).

The home: consumerism as/and common sense

It is also important to consider how the home is a “central protagonist” (Smitheram et al., 2017: 379), serving as a hyperreal agent of the American Dream. Jan Smitheram et al. (2017: 379) argue the home amplifies “intersections between neoliberal desires... individualisation and emotionalization” because it represents a “place of authenticity” (2007: 379). Therefore, it is a powerful image to co-opt in a hyperreal sense because it is understood to be a “material expression and representation of our true selves” (Miller in 2007: 375).

The celebrity house tour builds on a tradition of tethering the American Dream to home ownership (2007: 379). A home, the “biggest consumer item” (Smitheram et al., 2017: 379) available to buy, is linked to achieving “happiness” through an accumulation of objects of “affective value” (Ahmed in 2007: 385), something embodied within the hyperreal imagery of the celebrity home. One example in celebrity house tours of this “commodity fetishism” (Marx in Rosati, 2012: 352) is the barely used ‘trophy kitchens’ featured on *Cribs* (Harris, 2010: 14), which Smitheram et al. (2017: 386) argue reflect “refrigerator adverts in the 1950s”. Dorfman and Mattelart (1991: 98) reflect on the psychosocial impact this has on consumers, passionately arguing deprivation under the material conditions of capitalism lies “side-by-side with minute mental super-development” (1991: 98), achieved through buying commodities such as “the latest refrigerator” (1991: 98). This reflects Alberto Toscano’s (in Zompetti, 2012: 367) argument that “our postmodern condition is premised on abstractions that give us material meaning, such as status, commodities... and the...American dream.”

The intentional relationship this capitalist construction of the home and the celebrity house tour is revealed by the creator of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, Robin Leach (in Le, 2023), who said that by watching, the viewer “learns” that the “American Dream is still alive and well” (in 2023). Leach (in 2023) described the show as a way “everyone can share a taste of... what dreams money can buy” as the “rewards of hard work”. This framing of the celebrity house tour as a display of a dream achievable by anyone is important to U.S cultural imperialism because as Joseph Zompetti (2012: 373) argues, such mechanisms serve to make “the subaltern feel they are included” and therefore, their place in the “existing order” is justified by “common sense” (2012: 373). Within this structure, the “poor view themselves as... temporarily embarrassed millionaires” (Wright in Warby, 2020).

The Gramscian concept of common sense can be defined as “the most widespread conception of life and morals” (Liguori, 2021: 125) within a given society. As Zompetti (2012: 376) argues “to see how common sense operates [today]...we can examine the recent iterations of the so-called ‘American Dream’”. By viewing the celebrity house tour as a “recent

iteration” of the American Dream, one based on hyperreal imagery of the home, it reflects how images and representations “concretise ‘common sense’” (2012: 366). This is important because it reinforces the argument that contemporary U.S cultural imperialism is based on the export of images rather than ideals. This is reflected by Baudrillard (1988: 116), who posits that American global hegemony now rests on the “mythical power” of the “advertising image” and that this is linked to the successful export of the American “model” or “style” (1988: 116); reinforcing Dorfman and Mattelart’s (1991: 95) argument that the threat of American mass media “derives not so much from their embodiment of the “American way of life” as that of the “American dream of life”. By perpetuating a singular image of ‘the good life’, the home within the celebrity house tour reinforces the way in which U.S cultural imperialism presents consumer capitalism as the common-sense worldview; “hauntolog[ically]” (Mills, 2019) cancelling an alternative future by limiting the ability to imagine anything new to replace it with (Fisher in 2019).

Conclusion

In sum, my research has found that the celebrity house tour serves as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism is through its hyperreal construction of the American Dream. Central to this is the image of the ‘authentic’ celebrity and constructions of the home that appropriate desires for happiness by positing consumerism as common sense. The capitalist contradictions this both embodies and acquits helps explain the ongoing popularity of such entertainment.

Given the role of U.S cultural imperialism in perpetuating global inequality (Petras, 2000), the sinister aspect of this is how it reinforces “false consciousness” (van Elteren, 2003: 183) not as a choice, rather as a pathological inability to imagine alternatives (Fisher in Mills, 2019). Therefore, by deconstructing the celebrity house tour as a mechanism for U.S cultural imperialism, my paper speaks to the importance of further work that attempts to break through this “present myopia” (Fisher in Mills, 2019). Borrowing once again from Fisher (in Mills, 2019) worthy of future research is his concept of “acid communism”, as a means of reclaiming space in the cultural landscape for ideals rather than images, “for doubt, for... debate and for creative and revolutionary reading” (Rosati, 2012: 362).

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