This selection by Todd Gitlin is the first of three readings to examine the institution of the mass media. Gitlin, a professor of culture, journalism, and sociology at New York University, has researched the mass media for a number of years. His book Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives (2001) examines not only how American mass media defines and dominates culture in the United States, but also how it defies national boundaries and overwhelms other cultures in the world. The excerpt below describes the global spread of American mass media and the effects it has on other cultures.

Everywhere, the media flow defies national boundaries. This is one of its obvious, but at the same time amazing, features. A global torrent is not, of course, the master metaphor to which we have grown accustomed. We're more accustomed to Marshall McLuhan's global village. Those who resort to this metaphor casually often forget that if the world is a global village, some live in mansions on the hill, others in huts. Some dispatch images and sounds around town at the touch of a button; others collect them at the touch of their buttons. Yet McLuhan's image reveals an indispensable half-truth. If there is a village, it speaks American. It wears jeans, drinks Coke, eats at the golden arches, walks on swooshed shoes, plays electric guitars, recognizes Mickey Mouse, James Dean, E.T., Bart Simpson, R2-D2, and Pamela Anderson.

At the entrance to the champagne cellar of Piper-Heidsieck in Reims, in eastern France, a plaque declares that the cellar was dedicated by Marie Antoinette. The tour is narrated in six languages, and at the end you walk back upstairs into a museum featuring photographs of famous people drinking champagne. And who are they? Perhaps members of today's royal houses, presidents or prime ministers, economic titans or Nobel Prize winners? Of
Cultural bilingualism is routine. Just as their cultural zone where they share some dreams of freedom, wealth, comfort, and jeep, arrives near the Arctic Sea where live a tribe of Tungusians known for cultural imperialism, also conferred France's highest honor qualifies as entertainment—video games and pornography, for example. Or the little Japanese girl who asks an American visitor in all innocence, "Is there really a Disneyland in America?" (She knows the one in Tokyo.) Or the American staple, and hope to be recognized as one of the elect. When you wear the Israeli version that spells Coca-Cola in Hebrew, you express some worldwide connection with unknown peers, or a sense of irony, or both—in any event, a marker of membership. In a world of ubiquitous images, of easy mobility and casualness not so different from what Americans desire. But what the young experience in the video-game arcade or the music megastore is more than the flux of sensation. They flirt with a loose sort of social membership that requires little but a momentary (and monetary) surrender. Sampling American goods, images, and sounds, they affiliate with an empire of informality. Consuming a commodity, wearing a slogan or a logo, you affiliate with disaffiliation. You make a limited-liability connection, a virtual one. You borrow some of the effervescence that is supposed to emanate from this American staple, and hope to be recognized as one of the elect. When you wear the Israeli version that spells Coca-Cola in Hebrew, you express some worldwide connection with unknown peers, or a sense of irony, or both—in any event, a marker of membership. In a world of ubiquitous images, of easy mobility and casual tourism, you get to feel not only local or national but global—without locking yourself in a box so confining as to deserve the name "identity."

We are seeing on a world scale the familiar infectious rhythm of modernity. The money economy extends its reach, bringing with it a calculating nor uniform, so there is no simple way in which they are "Americanized," though there are American tags on their experience—low-cost links to status and fun. Everywhere, fun lovers, efficiency seekers, Americaphiles, and Americaphobes alike pass through the portals of Disney and the arches of McDonald's wearing Levi's jeans and Gap jackets. Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, the multicolor chorus of Coca-Cola, and the next flavor of the month or the universe are the icons of a curious sort of one-world sensibility, a global semiculture. America's bid for global unification surpasses in reach that of the Romans, the British, the Catholic Church, or Islam; though without either an army or a God, it requires less. The Tungusian boy with the reversed cap on his head does not automatically think of it as "American," let alone sides with the U.S. Army.

The misleadingly easy answer to the question of how American images and sounds became omnipresent is: American imperialism. But the images are not even faintly force-fed by American corporate, political, or military power. The empire strikes from inside the spectator as well as from outside. This is a conundrum that deserves to be approached with respect if we are to grasp the fact that Mickey Mouse and Coke are everywhere recognized and often enough enjoyed. In the peculiar unification at work throughout the world, there is surely a supply side, but there is not only a supply side. Some things are true even if multinational corporations claim so: there is demand.

What do American icons and styles mean to those who are not American? We can only imagine—but let us try. What young people graced with disposable income encounter in American television shows, movies, soft drinks, theme parks, and American-labeled (though not American-manufactured) running shoes, T-shirts, baggy pants, ragged jeans, and so on, is a way of being in the world, the experience of a flow of ready feelings and sensations bobbing up, disposable, dissolving, segueing to the next and the next after that—all in all, the kinetic feel that I have tried to describe in [my research]. It is a quality of immediacy and casualness not so different from what Americans desire. But what the young experience in the video-game arcade or the music megastore is more than the flux of sensation. They flirt with a loose sort of social membership that requires little but a momentary (and monetary) surrender. Sampling American goods, images, and sounds, they affiliate with an empire of informality. Consuming a commodity, wearing a slogan or a logo, you affiliate with disaffiliation. You make a limited-liability connection, a virtual one. You borrow some of the effervescence that is supposed to emanate from this American staple, and hope to be recognized as one of the elect. When you wear the Israeli version that spells Coca-Cola in Hebrew, you express some worldwide connection with unknown peers, or a sense of irony, or both—in any event, a marker of membership. In a world of ubiquitous images, of easy mobility and casual tourism, you get to feel not only local or national but global—without locking yourself in a box so confining as to deserve the name "identity."

We are seeing on a world scale the familiar infectious rhythm of modernity. The money economy extends its reach, bringing with it a calculating...
mentality. Even in the poor countries it stirs the same hunger for private feeling, the same taste for disposable labels and sensations on demand, the same attraction to fashion, the new and the now, that cropped up earlier in the West. Income beckons; income rewards. The taste for the marketed spectacle and the media-soaked way of life spreads. The culture consumer may not like the American goods in particular but still acquires a taste for the media's speed, formulas, and frivolity. Indeed, the lightness of American-sponsored "identity" is central to its appeal. It imposes few burdens. Affiliations coexist, overlap, melt together, form, and re-form.

Marketers, like nationalists and fundamentalists, promote "identities," but for most people, the mélange is the message. Traditional bonds bend under pressure from imports. Media from beyond help you have your "roots" and eat them, too. You can watch Mexican television in the morning and American in the afternoon, or graze between Kurdish and English. You can consolidate family ties with joint visits to Disney World—making Orlando, Florida, the major tourist destination in the United States, and the Tokyo and Marne-la-Vallée spin-offs massive attractions in Japan and France. You can attach to your parents, or children, by playing oldie music and exchanging sports statistics. You plunge back into the media flux, looking for—what? Excitement? Some low-cost variation on known themes? Some next new thing? You don't know just what, but you will when you see it—or if not, you'll change channels.

The Supply Side

About the outward thrust of the American culture industry there is no mystery. The mainspring is the classic drive to expand markets. In the latter half of the 1980s, with worldwide deregulation, export sales increased from 30 percent to 40 percent of Hollywood's total revenue for television and film. Since then, the percentages have stabilized. In 2000, total foreign revenues for all film and video revenue streams averaged 37 percent—for theatrical releases, 51 percent; for television, 41 percent; and for video, 27 percent.

Exporters benefit from the economies of scale afforded by serial production. American industrialists have long excelled at efficiencies, first anticipating and later developing the standardized production techniques of Henry Ford's assembly line. Early in the nineteenth century, minstrel shows were already being assembled from standardized components. Such efficiencies were later applied to burlesque, melodrama, vaudeville, radio soap opera, comic books, genre literature, musical comedy, and Hollywood studio productions. Cultural formula is not unique to the United States, but Americans were particularly adept at mass-producing it, using centralized management to organize road shows and coordinate local replicas.

If the American culture industry has long depended on foreign markets, foreign markets now also depend on American formulas: Westerns, action heroes, rock music, hip-hop. Globalized distribution expedites imitation. The American way generates proven results. Little imagination is required to understand why global entertainment conglomerates copy proven recipes or why theater owners outside the United States (many of whom are themselves American) want to screen them, even if they exaggerate the degree to which formula guarantees success. In a business freighted with uncertainty, the easiest decision is to copy. Individuals making careers also want to increase their odds of success....

American industrial advantages have been especially potent in movies and television, where mass promotion is linked to mass production, and language and local traditions are not as significant as in popular music. Compared with European rivals, Hollywood has the tremendous advantage of starting with a huge domestic market. Once the movie or TV show is made, each additional copy is cheap—by local standards, often ridiculously cheap. In the early 1980s, Danish television could lease a one-hour episode of Dallas for the cost of producing a single original minute of Danish drama. In television exports, Brazilian and Mexican soap operas rival American products; the Japanese remain dominant in the production and distribution of video games; and it is not inconceivable that other export powerhouses will develop. Still, for the moment, American exports predominate.

The Demand Side

But the supply-side argument won't suffice to explain global cultural dominance. American popular culture is not uniquely formulaic or transportable.... Moreover, availability is not popularity. No one forced Danes to watch Dallas, however cheaply purchased. In fact, when a new television entertainment chief took charge in 1981-82 and proceeded to cancel the show, thirty thousand protest letters poured in, and hundreds of Danes (mostly women, many rural) demonstrated in Copenhagen. When the chief's superiors told him he had better rethink his decision, he passed a sleepless night, bowed, and reversed himself. The dominance of American popular culture is a soft dominance—a collaboration. In the words of media analyst James Monaco, "American movies and TV are popular because they're popular."

That popularity has much to do with the fusion of market-mindedness and cultural diversity. The United States has the advantages of a polyglot, multirooted (or rather, uprooted) society that celebrates its compound nature and common virtues (and sins) with remarkable energy. Popular culture, by the time it ships from American shores, has already been "pretested" on a heterogeneous public—a huge internal market with variegated tastes. American popular culture is, after all, the rambunctious child of Europe and Africa. Our popular music and dance derive from the descendants of African slaves, among others. Our comic sense derives principally from the English, East European Jews, and, again, African Americans, with growing Hispanic infusions. Our stories come from everywhere; consider Ralph Waldo Ellison's Invisible Man, inspired jointly by Dostoyevsky, African American
folktales, and jazz. American culture is spongy, or in James Monaco’s happy term, promiscuous. He adds, “American culture simply doesn’t exist without its African and European progenitors, and despite occasional outbursts of ‘Americanism’ it continues to accept almost any input.”

To expand in the United States, popular culture had a clear avenue. It did not have to squeeze up against an aristocratic model, there being no wealthy landowning class to nourish one except in the plantation South—and there, slaves were the population that produced the most influential popular culture. Outside the South, from the early nineteenth century on, the market enjoyed prestige; it was no dishonor to produce culture for popular purposes. Ecclesiastical rivals were relatively weak. From the early years of the Republican, American culture was driven by a single overriding purpose: to entertain the common man and woman.

It is to America’s advantage as well that commercial work emerges from Hollywood, New York, and Nashville in the principal world language. Thanks to the British Empire-cum-Commonwealth, English is the second most commonly spoken native language in the world, and the most international. English is spoken and read as a second language more commonly than any other. Increasingly, the English that is taught and learned, the language in demand, is American, not British. It is the language of business and has acquired the cachet of international media. Of the major world languages, English is the most compressed; partly because of its Anglo-Saxon origins, the English version of any text is almost always shorter than translations in other languages. English is grammatically simple. American English in particular is pungent, informal, absorptive, evolving, precise when called upon to be precise, transferable between written and verbal forms, lacking in sharp distinctions between “high” and “low” forms, and all in all, well adapted for slogans, headlines, comic strips, song lyrics, jingles, slang, dubbing, and other standard features of popular culture. English is, in a word, the most torrential language. Moreover, the American language of images is even more accessible than the American language of words. The global popularity of Hollywood product often depends less on the spoken word, even when kept elementary (non-English speakers everywhere could understand Arnold Schwarzenegger without difficulty), than on crackling edits, bright smiles, the camera tracking and swooping, the cars crashing off cliffs or smashing into other cars, the asteroids plunging dramatically toward earth. In action movies, as in the Westerns that preceded them, speech is a secondary mode of expression. European competitors cannot make this claim, though Hong Kong can.

It is also an export advantage that “American” popular culture is frequently not so American at all. “Hollywood” is an export platform that happens to be located on the Pacific coast of the United States but uses capital, hires personnel, and depicts sites from many countries. Disney casually borrows mythologies from Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Denmark, China, colonial America, the Old Testament, anywhere. Any myth can get the Disney treatment: simplified, smoothed down, prettified. Pavilions as emblems of foreign countries, sites as replicas of sites, Fantasia, Pinocchio, Song of the South, Pocahontas, Mulan—Disney takes material where it can, as long as it comes out Disney’s industrialized fun.

Moreover, to sustain market advantages, the Hollywood multinational, ever thirsting for novelty, eagerly import, process, and export styles and practitioners from abroad. Consider, among directors, Alfred Hitchcock, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Sirk, Michael Curtiz, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, Ridley Scott, Peter Weir, Bruce Beresford, Paul Verhoeven, John Woo, Ang Lee... Consider, among stars, Greta Garbo, Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant, Anthony Quinn, Sean Connery, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mel Gibson, Hugh Grant, Jackie Chan, Kate Winslet, Michelle Yeoh, Chow Yun-Fat, Catherine Zeta-Jones, Antonio Banderas, Penelope Cruz. Hollywood is the global magnet—and (to mix metaphors) the acid bath into which, often enough, talent dissolves. Even the locales come from everywhere, or nowhere.

It is striking how many blockbusters take place in outer space (the Star Wars, Alien, and Star Trek series), in the prenational past (the Jurassic Park series), in the postnational future (the Planet of the Apes series, the two Terminator films, The Matrix), at sea (Titanic, The Perfect Storm—the latter also directed by a German, Wolfgang Petersen), or on an extended hop-skip-and-jump around the world (the James Bond series, Mission: Impossible)... No matter. Of Americanized popular culture, nothing more or less is asked but that it be interesting, a portal into the pleasure dome... So the disrespectful, lavish, energetic American torrent flows on and on, appealing to ideals of action and self-reinvention, extending the comforts of recognition to the uprooted. In a world of unease and uprooting, the American images, sounds, and stories overlap nations and global diasporas. Cultivating and nourishing desires, unifying but flexible, everywhere they leave behind deposits of what can only be called a civilization—not an ideology, or a system of belief, but something less resistible, a way of life soaked in feeling, seeming to absorb with equal conviction traces of every idea or, for that matter, the absence of all ideas. It has a clear field. In this time, one-world ideologies are decidedly flimsy. With socialism largely discredited, and each world religion checked by the others, the way of life with the greatest allure turns out to be this globalizing civilization of saturation and speed that enshrines individuals, links freedom to taste, tickles the senses. How odd, but inescapable, that insofar as there are unifying symbols today, they should be the undemanding ones—not the cross, the crescent, or the flag, let alone the hammer and sickle, but Coke and Mickey Mouse.

At least for now.

An End to Culture?

I have been arguing that American culture is a complex collaboration between venal, efficient suppliers and receptive, fickle consumers. The suppliers were already well understood by Alexis de Tocqueville, with his emphasis on efficiency and convenience; the consumers by Georg Simmel, with his
emphasize on the hunger for feeling and the taste for the transitory. The suppliers built a machine for delivering cultural goods; the consumers acquired a taste for them. What was true when commercial American culture poured across the country in the twentieth century remains true as it pours through the world today. The prominence of America's styles and themes is not rule from on high. To take it that way is to misunderstand its soft power.

What I have been calling the demand side is not necessarily clamor or hunger. It is more a compound of interest, liking, tolerance—and enthusiasm. There are fanatics who talk and write feverishly about the Star Wars movies, auctioning and purchasing rare merchandise, going so far as to take a day off work to buy a movie ticket to see the debut of the trailer for Episode I, The Phantom Menace; there is the wider circle of millions who look forward less passingly to the next installment; and an even wider one of more or less curious, possibly halfhearted customers keeping up with their crowds. The multiplex is filled with American films because the United States was first to produce a culture of comfort and convenience whose popularity was its primary reason for being. All in all, American popular culture is popular because (and to the extent that) its sleek, fast, fleeting styles of entertainment—its commitment to entertainment—dovetail with modern displacement and desire.

There is no going back to the forest clan or the village. There is no repealing the technologies that spray images on our walls, graft stories onto our screens, sing songs into our headphones. There is no diversion from the seduction and clamor, the convenience and irritation of media. There is no avoiding the spread of American-style pop—its coupling of irreverence and brutality; its love of the road and its degradation of the word; its light rock and heavy metal. This amalgam flows through the world for worse and for better, inviting, in unknowable proportions, immigration, emulation, and revulsion. Where the flow goes, there follows a fear that American marketing exudes a uniform "McWorld"—and brings, in its wake, with dialectical certainty, destructive "Jihads." 11

Yet for all the fear of standardization, American pop does not erase all the vernacular alternatives, all the local forms in which artists and writers give forth their styles and stories. The emergence of a global semicircle coexists with local sensibilities. It does not simply replace them. As the Norwegian media theorist Helge Romønning suggests, it's plausible to suppose that globalized, largely American culture is popular because (and to the extent that) its sleek, fast, fleeting styles of entertainment—its commitment to entertainment—dovetail with modern displacement and desire.

As for the media as a whole, what could stop the flood but a catastrophic breakdown of civilization? (In Steven Spielberg's A.I., not even global warming and the total immersion of Manhattan wipe out the media.) Why would the beat not go on? Too much desire and too much convenience converge in the nonstop spectacle; too much of the human desire to play, to test and perfect oneself, to feel, to feel good, to feel with others, to feel conveniently; too much of the desire for sensory pleasure, for a refuge from calculation, for a flight from life, or from death, or from both. The media have been gathering force for centuries. Why should their songs and stories cease to generate enthusiasm and anxiety, production and consumption, celebrity and irony, fandom and boredom, criticism and jamming, paranoia and secession? Why would any society in which people have the time to indulge their fantasies this way repeal these options? The media will sweep down, their flow continuous and widening, bearing banalities and mysteries, achievements and potentials, strangeness and disappointments—this would appear to be our complex fate.

I am not proposing that anyone cease trying to launch better work. Surely there will be—there deserve to be—fights over who gets to harness media power, over censorship, over improving contents and broadening access. Conservatives will want today's colossal controllers to keep control but clean up the sewage. Liberals will want new tributaries to flow and to bend the stream in their preferred directions. Techno-utopians will agree with the liberal law professor who writes of digital online sharing: "The result will be more music, poetry, photography, and journalism available to a far wider audience... For those who worry about the cultural, economic and political power of the global media companies, the dreamed-of revolution is at hand... It is we, not they, who are about to enter the promised land." 12 But these apparently different ideas share an ideal: more media, more of the time.

I cannot pretend to offer a definitive balance sheet on our odd form of life immersed in images, sounds, and stories. Nor can I suggest a ten-point program for revitalization or a list of preferable activities. I have tried to confront the media as a whole, to reconceive their onrushing immensity, and to explain how they became central to our civilization. To fans, critics, paranoids, exhibitionists, ironists, and the rest, to reformers of all stripes, I would propose taking some time to step back, forgoing the fantasies of electronic perfection, leaving behind the trend-spotting gurus and pundits who purport to interpret for us the hottest and latest. I propose that we stop—and imagine the whole phenomenon freshly, taking the media seriously not as a cornucopia of wondrous gadgets or a collection of social problems, but as a central condition of an entire way of life. Perhaps if we step away from the ripples of the moment, the week, or the season, and contemplate the torrent in its entirety, we will know what we want to do about it besides change channels.

**ENDNOTES**

1Economists Incorporated for the International Intellectual Property Alliance, Executive Summary, 2000_SWEK_EXEC.pdf. Thanks to Siva Vaidhyanathan for his discerning analysis of these statistics.

2This story is told by Berndt Ostendorf in "What Makes American Popular Culture So Popular? A View from Europe" (Odense, Denmark: Oasis, 2000).

3I benefited from a discussion about the overuse of the term culture with Kevin Robins, March 2, 2001.
