

Cultural Imperialism

John Tomlinson

“Watching Dallas”: The Imperialist Text and Audience Research

For many critics, the American TV series *Dallas* had become the byword for cultural imperialism in the 1980s. Ien Ang's study, *Watching Dallas* takes as its central question the tension between the massive international popularity of the Texan soap opera:

... in over ninety countries, ranging from Turkey to Australia, from Hong Kong to Great Britain ... with the proverbial empty streets and dramatic drop in water consumption when an episode of the series is going out ...

and the reaction of cultural commentators to this “success”:

Dallas was regarded as yet more evidence of the threat posed by American-style commercial culture against authentic national identities. In February 1983 for instance, Jack Lang, the French Minister for Culture ... had even proclaimed *Dallas* as the “symbol of American cultural imperialism”.

Ang detects amongst European cultural critics an “ideology of mass culture” by which she means a generalised hostility towards the imported products of the American mass culture industry, which has fixed on *Dallas* as the focus of its contempt.

Original publication details: John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Continuum, 1991. pp. 45–50, 108–13.

The Globalization Reader, Fifth Edition. Edited by Frank J. Lechner and John Boli.
Editorial material and organization © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Ang quotes Miche

It is not for no
culture is discu
against which o

The evident pop
“professional in
nicely the pro
cultural critics
ence may reac
Cultural im

It is seen as
automobiles
so on. All thi
As Lealand l

There is
wherever
evidence
Algerian

However
have atte
Ang's str
alism, is

Ang
thesis g
own en
conten
sugge
tion v
ology
relati
lot o

A
idec
goo
stru
the
ne
ca
ne
o

It is not for nothing that *Dallas* casts its ubiquitous shadow wherever the future of culture is discussed: it has become the perfect hate symbol, the cultural poverty ... against which one struggles.

The evident popularity of *Dallas* juxtaposed with its hostile critical reception amongst "professional intellectuals" and the linked charges of cultural imperialism poses for us nicely the problem of the audience in the discourse of media imperialism. For the cultural critics tend to condemn *Dallas* with scant regard to the way in which the audience may read the text.

Cultural imperialism is once more seen as an ideological property of the text itself. It is seen as inhering in the images of dazzling skyscrapers, expensive clothes and automobiles, lavish settings, the celebration in the narrative of power and wealth and so on. All this is seen to have an obvious ideological manipulative effect on the viewer. As Lealand has put it:

There is an assumption that American TV imports do have an impact whenever and wherever they are shown, but actual investigation of this seldom occurs. Much of the evidence that is offered is merely anecdotal or circumstantial. Observations of ... Algerian nomads watching *Dallas* in the heat of the desert are offered as sufficient proof.

However, encouraged by developments in British critical media theory, some writers have attempted to probe the audience reception of "imperialist texts" like *Dallas*. In Ang's study, although it is not primarily concerned with the issue of media imperialism, is one such.

Ang approaches the *Dallas* audience with the intention of investigating an hypothesis generated from her own experience of watching *Dallas*. She found that her own enjoyment of the show chafed against the awareness she had of its ideological content. Her critical penetration as "an intellectual and a feminist" of this ideology suggested to her that the pleasure she derived from the programme had little connection with, and certainly did not entail, an ideological effect. In reacting to the ideology in the text, she argues, the cultural critics overlook the crucial question in relation to the audience: "For we must accept one thing: *Dallas* is popular because a lot of people somehow enjoy watching it."

Ang saw the popularity of the show, which might be read as a sign of its imperialist ideological power, as a complex phenomenon without a single cause, but owing a good deal to the intrinsic pleasure to be derived from its melodramatic narrative structure. The show's ability to connect with "the melodramatic imagination" and the pleasure this provides were, Ang thought, the key to its success, and these had no necessary connection with the power of American culture or the values of consumer capitalism. What the cultural critics overlooked was the capacity of the audience to negotiate the possible contradictions between alien cultural values and the "pleasure of the text".

Ang's study was based on a fairly informal empirical procedure. She placed an advertisement in a Dutch women's magazine asking people to write to her describing

what they liked or disliked about *Dallas*. Her correspondents revealed a complex set of reactions, including evidence that some did indeed, like Ang herself, manage to resolve a conflict between their distaste for the ideology of the show and a pleasure in watching it. For example:

Dallas. ... God, don't talk to me about it. I'm hooked on it! But you wouldn't believe the number of people who say to me, "Oh, I thought you were against Capitalism?" I am, but *Dallas* is just so tremendously exaggerated, it has nothing to do with capitalists any more, it's just sheer artistry to make up such nonsense.

Ang found such a high level of disapproval for the cultural values of *Dallas* in some of her correspondents that she speaks of their views being informed by the "ideology of mass culture" of the cultural critics. These viewers, she argues, have internalised what they perceive as the "correct" attitude towards mass-cultural imports – that of the disapproving professional intellectuals. They thus feel the need to justify their enjoyment of the show by, for example, adopting an ironic stance towards it. Alternatively, she suggests, an opposing "anti-intellectual" ideological discourse of "populism" may allow the *Dallas* fan to refuse the ideology of mass culture as elitist and paternalist, and to insist (in such popular maxims as "there's no accounting for taste") on their right to their pleasure without cultural "guilt".

Ang's analysis of the ideological positioning and struggle around the text of *Dallas* is not without its problems. But her empirical work does at the very least suggest how naive and improbable is the simple notion of an immediate ideological effect arising from exposure to the imperialist text. The complex, reflective and self-conscious reactions of her correspondents suggest that cultural critics who assume this sort of effect massively underestimate the audience's active engagement with the text and the critical sophistication of the ordinary viewer/reader.

The same message comes from most recent studies of audience response. Katz and Liebes, for instance, also looked at reactions to *Dallas*, but in a rather more formal empirical study than Ang's. Their work involved a large-scale cross-cultural study of the impact of *Dallas*, comparing different ethnic groups in Israel with a group of American viewers. Katz and Liebes situate themselves within the growing perspective in media research which sees the audience as active and the process of meaning construction as one of "negotiation" with the text in a particular cultural context. They argue that this perspective:

raises a question about the apparent ease with which American television programmes cross cultural and linguistic frontiers. Indeed, the phenomenon is so taken for granted that hardly any systematic research has been done to explain the reasons why these programmes are so successful. One wonders how such quintessentially American products are understood at all. The often-heard assertion that this phenomenon is part of the process of cultural imperialism presumes, first, that there is an American message in the content and form; second, that this message is somehow perceived by viewers; and, third, that it is perceived in the same way by viewers in different cultures.

Katz and Liebes, like Ang, are generally dubious about the way in which the media imperialism argument has been presented by its adherents:

Since the effects alone, it is of par
ence absorb, exp
are receiving.

Their study of D
examine the me
audience respon
ing of three cou
programme in
meanings of TV
interpretation.
is not essential
tion – "convers
and evaluative
in question is
to "decode".

The group
grounds – "lo
was "ethnical

There were
first-and se
these grou
their "read
Angeles.

The groups
discussion
and formed
semiologic

The gro
"the narra
programm
divergent
groups an
"misread"

more con
taken he
former le
more co
her own
the nar
bounda

More
brough
Moroc

Okmulgee, OK 74447

Since the effects attributed to a TV programme are often inferred from content analysis alone, it is of particular interest to examine the extent to which members of the audience absorb, explicitly or implicitly, the messages which critics and scholars allege they are receiving.

Their study of *Dallas* thus represents perhaps the most ambitious attempt so far to examine the media imperialism argument empirically from the perspective of audience response. In order to do this, they organised fifty "focus groups" consisting of three couples each to watch an episode of *Dallas*. The idea of watching the programme in groups was essential to one of their guiding premises, that the meanings of TV texts are arrived at via a social process of viewing and discursive interpretation. They believe, in common with other recent views, that TV viewing is not essentially an isolated individual practice, but one in which social interaction – "conversation with significant others" – is a vital part of the interpretative and evaluative process. This may be even more significant when the programme in question is the product of an alien culture and, thus, potentially more difficult to "decode".

The groups that Katz and Liebes arranged were all from similar class backgrounds – "lower middle class with high school education or less" – and each group was "ethnically homogeneous":

There were ten groups each of Israeli Arabs, new immigrants to Israel from Russia, first- and second-generation immigrants from Morocco and Kibbutz members. Taking these groups as a microcosm of the worldwide audience of *Dallas*, we are comparing their "readings" of the programme with ten groups of matched Americans in Los Angeles.

The groups followed their viewing of *Dallas* with an hour-long "open structured" discussion and a short individual questionnaire. The discussions were recorded and formed the basic data of the study, what Katz and Liebes refer to as "ethno-semiological data".

The groups were invited to discuss, first, simply what happened in the episode – "the narrative sequence, and the topics, issues and themes with which the programme deals". Even at this basic level Katz and Liebes found examples of divergent readings influenced, they argue, by the cultural background of the groups and reinforced by their interaction. One of the Arabic groups actually "misread" the information of the programme in a way which arguably made it more compatible with their cultural horizon. In the episode viewed, Sue Ellen had taken her baby and run away from her husband JR, moving into the house of her former lover and his father. However, the Arab group confirmed each other in the **more conventional** reading – in their terms – that she had actually gone to live in her own father's house. The implications of this radical translation of the events of the narrative must at least be to undermine the notion that texts cross cultural boundaries intact.

More importantly, perhaps, Katz and Liebes found that different ethnic groups brought their own values to a judgement of the programme's values. They quote a Moroccan Jew's assessment:

Machluf: You see, I'm a Jew who wears a skullcap and I learned from this series to say, "Happy is our lot, goodly is our fate" that we're Jewish. Everything about JR and his baby, who has maybe four or five fathers, who knows? The mother is Sue Ellen, of course, and the brother of Pam left. Maybe he's the father. ... I see that they're almost all bastards.

This sort of response, which seems to be not just a rejection of Western decadence, but an actual reinforcement of the audience's own cultural values, extended from issues of interpersonal and sexual morality to the programme's celebration of wealth: "With all that they have money, my life style is higher than theirs." However, here, at the "real foundations", Katz and Liebes found a more typical response to be an agreement on the importance of money:

MIRIAM: Money will get you anything. That's why people view it. People sit at home and want to see how it looks.

[...]

YOSEF: Everybody wants to be rich. Whatever he has, he wants more.

ZARI: Who doesn't want to be rich? The whole world does.

It scarcely needs saying that responses like these demonstrate no more than agreement with aspects of the perceived message of *Dallas* and cannot be taken as evidence of the programme's ideological effect. All cultures, we must surely assume, will generate their own set of basic attitudes on issues like the relationship between wealth and happiness. *Dallas* represents, perhaps, one very forceful statement of such an attitude, informed by a dominant global culture of capitalism. But it would be absurd to assume that people in any present-day culture do not have developed attitudes to such a central aspect of their lives quite independent of any televisual representations. We clearly cannot assume that simply watching *Dallas* makes people want to be rich! The most we can assume is that agreement here, as with disagreement elsewhere with the programme's message, represents the outcome of people's "negotiations" with the text.

Katz and Liebes are careful not to draw any premature conclusions from this complex data. But they do at least suggest that it supports their belief in the active social process of viewing and demonstrates a high level of sophistication in the discursive interpretations of ordinary people. They also make the interesting suggestion that the social and economic distance between the affluent denizens of the Southfork Range and their spectators around the globe is of less consequence than might be thought: "Unhappiness is the greatest leveller." This thought chimes with Ang's argument that it is the melodramatic nature of the narrative and its appeal to the "tragic structure of feeling", rather than its glimpses of consumer capitalism at its shiny leading edge that scores *Dallas*'s global ratings.

The general message of empirical studies – informal ones like Ang's and more large-scale formal projects like Katz and Liebes's – is that audiences are more active and critical, their responses more complex and reflective, and their cultural values more resistant to manipulation and "invasion" than many critical media theorists have assumed. [...]

Multinationals

Critics of multinational cultural convergence and discourse of cultural imperialism is Cees Hamelink's book which acknowledges the cultural autonomy and "synchronisation" – a term used in the processes of "cultural change" in historical terms and global capitalism. It is objected to and, since the grounds of cultural imperialism. In his opening chapter on international scene

In a Mexican v

performance fe

In Singapore

imitation of Fa

In Saudi Ara

call for the Mo

the traditiona

In its gigan

identity can

Navajo alpha

The first thin

observations

nature. Ham

confronting

the persona

discourse: it

we need to

shapes the

brings – an

intention,

sent itself

of global

stance Ha

have quit

cultural

threaten

haps, no

emblem

Multinational Capitalism and Cultural Homogenisation

Critics of multinational capitalism frequently do complain of its tendency towards cultural convergence and homogenisation. This is the major criticism made in the discourse of cultural imperialism which takes capitalism as its target. A good example is Cees Hamelink's book, *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications*. Hamelink, who acknowledges the co-operation of both Schiller and Salinas, places the issues of cultural autonomy and cultural homogenisation – or what he refers to as “cultural synchronisation” – at the centre of his analysis. He is broadly correct in identifying the processes of “cultural synchronization” (or homogenisation) as unprecedented in historical terms and in seeing these processes as closely connected to the spread of global capitalism. But he fails to show why cultural synchronisation should be objected to and, specifically, he fails to show that it should be objected to on the grounds of cultural autonomy.

In his opening chapter Hamelink lists a number of personal “experiences of the international scene” to illustrate his thesis. For example:

In a Mexican village the traditional ritual dance precedes a soccer match, but the performance features a gigantic Coca-Cola bottle.

In Singapore, a band dressed in traditional Malay costume offers a heart-breaking imitation of Fats Domino.

In Saudi Arabia, the television station performs only one local cultural function – the call for the Moslem prayer. Five times a day, North American cops and robbers yield to the traditional muezzin.

In its gigantic advertising campaign, IBM assures Navajo Indians that their cultural identity can be effectively protected if they use IBM typewriters equipped with the Navajo alphabet.

The first thing to note about these examples is precisely their significance as *personal* observations – and this is not to make any trivial point about their “subjective” nature. Hamelink expresses the cultural standpoint of the concerned Westerner confronting a perplexing set of global phenomena. We have to accept, at the level of the personal, the sincerity of his concern and also the validity of this personal discourse: it is valid for individuals to express their reaction to global tendencies. But we need to acknowledge that this globe-trotting instancing of cultural imperialism shapes the discourse in a particular way: to say “here is the *sameness* that capitalism brings – and here – and here ...” is to assume, however liberal, radical or critical the intention, the role of the “tourist”: the problem of homogenisation is likely to present itself to the Western intellectual who has a sense of the diversity and “richness” of global culture as a particular threat. For the people involved in each discrete instance Hamelink presents, the experience of Western capitalist culture will probably have quite different significance. Only if they can adopt the (privileged) role of the cultural tourist will the sense of the homogenisation of global culture have the same threatening aspect. The Kazakhstani tribesman who has no knowledge of (and, perhaps, no interest in) America or Europe is unlikely to see his cassette player as emblematic of creeping capitalist domination. And we cannot, without irony, argue

that the Western intellectual's (informed?) concern is more valid: again much hangs on the question, "who speaks?"

This said, Hamelink does draw from these instances an empirical conclusion which is, I think, fairly uncontroversial:

One conclusion still seems unanimously shared: the impressive variety of the world's cultural systems is waning due to a process of "cultural synchronisation" that is without historic precedent.

For those in a position to view the world as a cultural totality, it cannot be denied that certain processes of cultural convergence are under way, and that these are new processes. This last is an important point, for Hamelink is careful to acknowledge that cultures have always influenced one another and that this influence has often enriched the interacting communities – "the richest cultural traditions emerged at the actual meeting point of markedly different cultures, such as Sudan, Athens, the Indus Valley, and Mexico". Even where cultural interaction has been in the context of political and economic domination, Hamelink argues, there has been, in most cases a "two-way exchange" or at least a tolerance of cultural diversity. There is a sharp difference for him between these patterns and modern "cultural synchronization":

In the second half of the twentieth century, a destructive process that differs significantly from the historical examples given above threatens the diversity of cultural systems. Never before has the synchronization with one particular cultural pattern been of such global dimensions and so comprehensive.

Let us be clear about what we are agreeing. It seems to me that Hamelink is right, broadly speaking, to identify cultural synchronisation as an unprecedented feature of global modernity. The evaluative implications of his use of the word "destructive", however, raises larger problems. It is one thing to say that cultural diversity is being destroyed, quite another to lament the fact. The latter position demands reasons which Hamelink cannot convincingly supply. The quotation continues in a way that raises part of the problem: "Never before has the process of cultural influence proceeded so subtly, without any blood being shed and with the receiving culture thinking it had sought such cultural influence." With his last phrase Hamelink slides towards the problematic of false consciousness. As we have seen more than once before, any critique which bases itself in the idea that cultural domination is taking place "behind people's backs" is heading for trouble. To acknowledge that a cultural community might have thought it had sought cultural influence is to acknowledge that such influence has at least *prima facie* attractions.

This thought could lead us to ask if the process of cultural homogenisation itself might not have its attractions. It is not difficult to think of examples of cultural practices which would probably attract a consensus in favour of their universal application: health care; food hygiene; educational provision; various "liberal" cultural attitudes towards honesty, toleration, compassion and so on; democratic public processes etc. This is not to say that any of these are indisputable "goods" under any description whatever, nor that they are all the "gifts" of an expanding capitalist

modernity. But it is defined, that the same in any area things they object undermines the a quite separate about the spread judgement.

Engaging with see, pretty swif ways of approach face to avoid th on the ground notion of aut logical connect cultural practice choices and a strikes me as indeed "critic

Hamelink any society i ment", by v location: "D ing to them particularly to argue th from the f point he a dom from of societ best be d of surviv

There does Ha adaptati allows f the phy of milk Gate is

Rep Wo exp pre ver co

modernity. But it is to say that there are plenty of aspects of "culture", broadly defined, that the severest critic of cultural homogenisation might wish to find the same in any area of the globe. Critics of cultural homogenisation are selective in the things they object to, and there is nothing wrong in this so long as we realise that it undermines the notion that homogenisation is a bad thing in itself. But then we enter a quite separate set of arguments – not about the uniformity of capitalist culture, but about the spread of its pernicious features – which require quite different criteria of judgement.

Engaging with the potentially attractive features of homogenisation brings us to see, pretty swiftly, the problems in its use as a critical concept. But there are other ways of approaching the issue, and one of Hamelink's arguments seems on the surface to avoid these problems. He argues that cultural synchronisation is to be deplored on the grounds that it is a threat to cultural autonomy. I would argue against both the notion of autonomy as applied to a "culture" in the holistic sense and against any logical connection between the concept of autonomy and any particular *outcome* of cultural practices. Autonomy, as I understand it, refers to the free and uncoerced choices and actions of agents. But Hamelink uses the notion of autonomy in what strikes me as a curious way, to suggest a feature of cultural practices which is necessary, indeed "critical", for the actual survival of a cultural community.

Hamelink's reasoning appears to be based on the idea that the cultural system of any society is an *adaptive* mechanism which enables the society to exist in its "environment", by which he seems to mean the physical and material features of its global location: "Different climatic conditions, for example, demand different ways of adapting to them (i.e., different types of food, shelter and clothing)." Again, there is nothing particularly controversial about this, except in the obvious sense that we might want to argue that many of the cultural practices of modernity are rather more "distanced" from the function of survival than those of more "primitive" systems. But from this point he argues that the "autonomous" development of cultural systems – the freedom from the processes of "cultural synchronization" – are necessary to the "survival" of societies. Why should this be so? Because "the adequacy of the cultural system can best be decided upon by the members of the society who face directly the problems of survival and adaptation".

There are a number of difficulties arising from this sort of argument. First, what does Hamelink mean by the "survival" of a society? In his reference to very basic adaptations to environmental conditions he seems to trade on the idea that a culture allows for the actual physical survival of its members. At times he explicitly refers to the physical survival of people. For example, he claims that the intensive promotion of milk-powder baby food in the Third World by companies like Nestlé and Cow and Gate is a practice that can have life-threatening consequences:

Replacing breast-feeding by bottle feeding has had disastrous effects in many Third World countries. An effective, adequate, and cheap method has been exchanged for an expensive, inadequate and dangerous product. ... Many illiterate mothers, unable to prepare the milk powder correctly, have not only used it improperly but have also inadvertently transformed the baby food into a lethal product by using it in unhygienic

There are important issues having to do with the "combined and unequal development" produced by the spread of capitalism of which this is a good example. But the incidence of illness and death Hamelink refers to here, deplorable though it is, will obviously not carry the weight of his argument about cultural synchronisation affecting the physical survival of whole populations in the Third World. He cannot, plausibly, claim that cultural synchronisation with capitalist modernity carries this direct threat. It is probably true that capitalist production has long-term consequences for the global environment, thus for physical survival on a global scale, but this is a separate argument.

At any rate, Hamelink's notion of survival seems to slide from that of physical survival to the *survival of the culture itself*. But this is a very different proposition, which cannot be sustained by the functional view of culture he takes as his premise. For the failure of a culture to "survive" in an "original" form may be taken itself as a process of adaptation to a new "environment" – that of capitalist industrial modernity. A certain circularity is therefore introduced into the argument. Hamelink claims that unique cultures arise as adaptive mechanisms to environments, so he deplors heteronomy since it threatens such adaptation. But what could cultural synchronisation mean if not an "adaptation" to the demands of the social environment of capitalism?

The incoherences of this account arise, I believe, from the attempt to circumvent the problems of autonomy in cultural terms by referring the holistic view to a functional logic of adaptation. Autonomy can only apply to agents, and cultures are not agents. Hamelink seeks to bypass these problems with an argument that reduces the ethical-political content of "autonomy" to make it a mere indicator of social efficiency – the guarantor of the "best" form of social organisation in a particular environment. His argument is incoherent precisely because autonomy cannot be so reduced: in cultural terms, "best" is not to be measured against a simple index of physical survival. Things are far more complicated than this. Cultural autonomy must address the autonomous choices of agents who make up a cultural community; there is no escaping this set of problems by appeal to functionality. Hamelink gives the game away in his reference, cited earlier, to a form of cultural "false consciousness" and elsewhere where he speaks of cultural synchronisation as cultural practices being "persuasively communicated to the receiving countries".

I do not believe the appeal to autonomy grounds Hamelink's critique of cultural synchronisation. Even if it did, this would be an objection to the inhibition of independence by manipulation, not to the resulting "sameness" of global culture. But Hamelink does want to object to "sameness": this is implicit in his constant references to the "rich diversity" of cultures under threat. What are the grounds for such an objection?

Adaptation to physical environments has, historically, produced a diversity in cultural practices across the globe. However, the *preservation* of this diversity – which is what Hamelink wants – seems to draw its justification from the idea that cultural diversity is a good thing in itself. But this depends on the position from which you speak. If the attractions of a uniform capitalist modernity outweigh the charms of diversity, as they well may for those from the outside looking in, it is difficult to insist on the priority of preserving differences. Indeed, the appeal to variety might well be turned back on the critic of capitalism. For it might be argued that individual cultures

making up
experience
nature for
cultural ex
It must
in capitali
modified
as such: i
differen
to the sp
capitalist

making up the rich mosaic that Hamelink surveys are lacking in a variety of cultural experience, being tied, as Marx observed, to the narrow demands of the struggle with nature for survival. Cultural synchronisation could in some cases increase variety in cultural experience.

It must be said immediately that arguments exist that the *nature* of such experience in capitalist modernity is in some sense deficient – shallow, “one-dimensional”, “commodified”, and so on. But this is not a criticism of homogenisation or synchronisation as such: it is a criticism of the sort of culture that synchronisation brings. It is quite different to object to the spread of something bad – uniform badness – than to object to the spread of uniformity itself. This demands quite separate arguments about capitalism as a culture. [...]