

## How Do You Say Okei in English? (On New and Archaic Forms of Americanization)<sup>1</sup>

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*A lengthy epigraph describing thoughts from the year 1909, transcribed in 1948 by Don Agustín Yañez in his novel The Edge of the Storm:*

*Like discord-driven winds, discord in and of themselves, worse than that of muleteers. (It's hard to say which is worse, their absence or their return....To say nothing of the families and fields being bled dry.) "It's worse when they come back," most people say. "And they gain nothing from their experience. Even those who come back with money aren't satisfied here any longer. Many of them don't want to work anymore; they just strut around, air their opinions, and criticize everything. They're a bad example, making fun of religion, the country, the customs. They sow doubt, undermine patriotism, and encourage others to leave this 'filthy, poverty-stricken country.' They're the ones who spread ideas of Masonry, Socialism, and Spiritism. And they've no respect for women. No sense of responsibility at all. They're vicious and quarrelsome, always ready to pick a fight. They've lost the fear of God; why say anything more? And the more there are of them, the more important they think they are. Nobody gets any peace any more. They meddle with everything: with the rich for being rich and the poor for being poor. They have no respect for anyone. Poor people! Poor country! They think because they can roll off a few strange words they know more than anybody else and are a cut above other people, but they can't read a bit better than when they left. Just because they have some gold teeth that they flash every chance they get. Because they come back with pointy shoes, felt hats, wide-legged trousers, and shirts with wristbands and shiny cuff-links. With their hair bushy in front and shaved behind. They don't even like moustaches anymore. They're ridiculous. They certainly are. When poor old Don Pedro Rubio's stepson came back and saw him stirring atole, he said he couldn't remember the word for it! But he remembered how to stir up trouble all right. They're ridiculous. What gets me the most is the way they laugh and talk big. "How can anybody forget the*

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*language he's been brought up with?" "They're traitors, that's all there is to it. Whether they know it or not, they're the advance guard of the gringos, sent to take our land away from us, the land they missed the last time." "Why they attract the women like flies is beyond me."*

## "POOR IRAQIS. THE GRINGOS DON'T EVEN TREAT THEIR NEIGHBORS THAT BADLY"

What is the United States for those who never, despite their geographic location, see themselves as North Americans? Historically speaking, for Mexicans the United States, as a feeling, sense or political position, has been, simultaneously or in succession: the proven enemy –neither “strange” but perfectly “natural”; the Good Neighbor of puerile diplomacy; the one who stole more than half of Mexico’s territory; the source of all evil in the nation; the model of organizational efficiency and civilization; the leader of the heretical conspiracy against the country that professes the true religion; the paradigm of modern –or indeed post-modern– behavior; technological powerhouse; plundering empire; prop for the market economy; place of new and increasing opportunities; the vanguard of transformation; the nation fated by Providence to sow evil throughout Latin America; the cradle of Hollywood, that imaginary of imaginaries...

Among Mexicans (governments, elites, middle, and lower classes) the United States is (check one or more of the following): the sole example to be followed; intense racism; the place where hopes of setting down new roots are reborn; the despoiler of natural resources; supplier of high-cost technologies; apparatus of unscrupulous interventionism; cultural and labor magnet; the kingdom of the spectacle –the future dances in Las Vegas–; and the adversary of the Mexican Family. At the same time, the United States is the ideology of the strongest; the sanctification of the Cold War and violent intervention in other countries; the supplier of comfort; and the land that expands the horizons of knowledge and pleasure, limits poor countries’ opportunities, and destroys creative processes and their set of stimuli...

A point of clarification: the ungraspable, central issue of the United States, the great power, is never the same as the phenomenon of *Americanization*. What I understand by the latter is –and I have never seen major discrepancies emerge when examples are given– the sociological and psychological process that sees in the culture of the United States the features and qualities of modernity. In terms of behavior, Americanization is the theory and practice of individuals and groups who, faced with the advance of the United States, constantly blend what they observe, what they reject, what they don’t notice that they perceive, what they assimilate, what they imitate, what they find useful in everyday life, what stimulates their experi-

ential opportunism. Societies become Americanized (that is, they learn a catalog of behaviors and conditioned responses) due to the fervor for technology, seeking to change the present and thereby altering the past; the zeal to acquire efficiency or religious convictions; the desire to become international whether by moving house or staying right where you are; and the increasing taste for the habits and myths that come from the other side of the hill or beyond the border patrols.

Thus, for instance, the cultural industries practice the serial murder of ancestral customs, the fear of anachronism becomes the basis for nomadism, and Americanization is such a vigorous process that it even affects those who live in the United States. This happens from France to Vietnam, the Philippines to Cuba, Argentina to Venezuela, because Americanization, a home-delivery service for churning out dreams and nightmares – “I dreamt I was being chased by my traditions, but I woke up before they caught me” – has been operating for over a century.

**“HE’S BECOME SO AMERICANIZED NOW HE DOESN’T  
WANT TO GO THE U.S. FOR FEAR OF LOSING HIS IDENTITY”**

If anything, the question of Americanization has a huge influence over debates on modernity, nationalism, post-nationalism and globalization. When it comes down to it, the dilemma has already been resolved: the planet is Americanized, and Mexico, the neighbor who was only good between 1941 and 1945, can be no exception. It no longer makes sense to describe Americanization as the conflict between the Protectors of National Identity and the cheerleaders<sup>2</sup> for Integration with North America at Any Cost. In reality –or what passes for reality– Americanization, even more than the irresistible flow of novelties, is fed by the fear of turning into a pillar of salt if you live with your gaze fixed on traditions, and this is what explains the fiasco of nationalism, the imitation of all things American to the nth degree, and a creativity based on assimilation of influences.

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I wrote *traditions* and stop for a moment. In Latin America, since the first decades of the twentieth century, too many manifestations of Americanization not only do not oppose tradition, but have become a substantial part of them. Yes, Elvis Gutiérrez, National Identity can no longer be imagined without these great areas of Ameri-

<sup>2</sup> *Cheer-leaders* [sic] in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

canization. The first signs of alarm about Americanization (under this name) can be found around the end of the nineteenth century in conservative newspapers, which defended national essences, and, with a different vocabulary, in liberal newspapers, which sought to safeguard sovereignty. In no particular order, Americanization has contributed the following to our traditions, thereby becoming a profoundly endearing part of them (to use the adjective in vogue for conveying emotion): the renovation of English terms, which users find have a certain cachet; Mother's Day (since 1922); the Christmas tree, easier to set up than carefully-crafted nativity scenes; Santa Claus, more homey than the Three Wise Men, who in any case come from the East; the "Day of Love and Friendship" (Valentine's Day); singing Happy Birthday; Halloween as a third Day of the Dead; and the iconographies of American cinema, jazz, and blues. (I pause at the end of a period).

One of the meanings of "tradition" is the memory of the life of the family or families, and this is where Americanization entails convincing and enduring internal transformations: it renews the idea of evenings at home, and restores the notion of the home and the housewife. ("Radio invented the housewife," declared Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta.) It also alleviates domestic chores with home appliances (a partial emancipation); forms almost all genres and sub-genres of national cinema; and has held sway over television ever since the first comedy program to be broadcast, the Presidential Address of September 1, 1952.

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I shall briefly run through the national cinema's process of adaptation:

- *Ranchera* comedies, which come from the films of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, and which in Hollywood even briefly included the figure of the Charro Cantor himself, who in *Mexican Fiesta* (1940) was played by Jorge Negrete –indeed, the Andrew Sisters' version of the popular song "Ay, Jalisco no te rajes" bore the paradoxical title "The Gay Caballero." And the basic format of *Allá en el Rancho Grande* is a kind of rural sit-com;<sup>3</sup>
- the Western, very poorly adapted (the Western-*enchilada*), fluctuating between involuntary parody and loss of all credibility;
- gangster movies (Chicago relocated to Mexico City's historic center) which never get beyond involuntary humor;

<sup>3</sup> *Sit-com* in English in the original. [Translator's Note.]

- the mechanism of the star system<sup>4</sup> (if there are no myths or projects for myths, there are no realities);
- the historically-oriented melodrama (the “weepy epic”<sup>5</sup>), with films of the quality of *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (Let’s Go With Pancho Villa), *El compadre Mendoza* (My Buddy Mendoza), *El prisionero 13* (Prisoner 13), *Río Escondido* (Hidden River);
- proof of the path taken from imitation to originality: the Mexican melodrama, a genre which demands the gentile adjective, reprises elements of French cinema, Spanish theater (the guardians of honor) and American film melodramas. At the end of all this, an unstoppable overflow emerges, *tremendismo* as humanism, a literal river of afflictions and the indispensable phrases when it comes to the show-downs within families or between couples: “Go then, Camilla, but take my heart with you, because I don’t like holding on to trinkets!”;
- the central comedy is in the universal destruction of objects, as can be seen in Tin Tan’s first films.

As in most countries, the national film industry is based on that of Hollywood. From the start, there are no doubts: audience development demands internationalization, and this can only be granted by proximity to American cinema.

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As for the rest, the history of all nations (inventions that become webs of stories, institutions, customs, surrenders, sacrifices, resentments, love of the homeland) is to a large degree achieved by way of “loans,” by adapting achievements and discoveries. The U.S. Constitution (1776) had enormous repercussions on the Mexican Constitutions, and liberal thinking in Mexico took full advantage of U.S. federalism and the French Revolution. Everything is taken from everywhere, on the condition that it is immediately transformed.

Along with the widespread influence of cinema, the history of popular urban culture in Mexico, which I distinguish from mass culture, shows imprints and returns them, transformed into a local version. Examples:

Mexican comics, with very few exceptions, are each the outcome of an admiration for U.S. comic-book artists and the search for an audience on the basis of proven successes in the United States. *Tawa* and *Wama* are very obviously taken from the

<sup>4</sup> *Star system* in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>5</sup> *Epic weepy* in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

Tarzan of Edgar Rice Burroughs; the creator of *Los Supersabios*, Germán Butze, had in mind U.S. comics that blend adventure with humor, dressing them up with slang expressions and situations where clowning around is an important element of fantasy; the Mexican comic *par excellence*, Gabriel Vargas' *La familia Burrón*, started out in the mold of *Bringin' Up Father*, the weekly tale of the domineering wife and husband who feigns submission; very quickly, Vargas abandoned his model to find humor in the manner of speech and a combination of extreme parody and scrupulous realism; the comic actor Germán Valdés, known as Tin Tan, the peak of modern urban comedy –Cantinflas, meanwhile, is the embodiment of traditions associated with poverty gone mad– has his background in the uprisings and rebellions, in his case linguistic and corporeal, of East L.A. *pachucos*, the gesticulations made by orchestra conductor Cab Calloway as he sings, and border speech, reworking their origins until they become a part of him; songsters of the likes of Elvira Ríos, María Luisa Landín, and Chelo Silva have heard the genially melodramatic style of the torch singers, and as a result turn the bolero into an interminable collective autobiography.

**"HER NAME IS PAMELA, AND SO FAR SO GOOD—BUT  
THE SURNAME PÉREZ RUINS THE EFFECT OF THE ONOMASTIC SURGERY"**

Americanization is not a mechanical process for every country. Each takes what is considered essential and what is dictated by fashion, and the processes of intervention immediately intervene. This is how what might, unreservedly, be called "the Mexicanization of Americanization" comes about, and this is quite different from the act of "losing one's nationality." One can be very nationalistic, but of two countries at the same time, in an uneven and combined fashion.

*The Mexicanization of Americanization. Or the Peruvianization, Colombianization, or Hispanicization:* the responses to the model are international. Thanks to globalization, this process has now entered a new stage, still hard to predict, increased in power by the use of the Web. The mechanism is a more or less exact one: fashions and changes to everyday life are enthusiastically added to social and personal life, changing along the way, and after a few twists and turns the adaptation that arrived from the United States is ready to be defended as an admirable aspect of native tradition. (The pinnacle of this is Mother's Day.) Nothing, in any case, that doesn't happen in other countries. If a *caifán* is a likeable person, one who *cae fain*,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Here the "bien" in the Spanish expression "cae bien" (used to describe a person as "likeable") has been changed for the English "fine," but spelled according to Spanish phonetic orthography. [Translator's Note].

and if the *casita de sololoy* of the children's song is taken from that novel material, celluloid,<sup>7</sup> then why not assess the progress of the Mexicanization of Americanization? *Good-bye mi chaparrita*<sup>8</sup> and *don't cry for your Pancho*.

The view of Americanization as a homogenous steamroller is opposed by the need to continue living within specific cultural forms, out of preference, habit, or functionality. A crowning example of this comes from the academic world: the point where nationalism is most discredited is also when the study of national traits receives greatest credit. The different histories of Mexico had never before been studied so much, nor had the circumstances of the country been explored in such detail beyond its incomparable essences, from "the Homeland comes first"<sup>9</sup> and "Respect for the rights of others is peace"<sup>10</sup> to "You just eat, and you leave,"<sup>11</sup> and "As they say in my parts, whatever it were that went on, I won."<sup>12</sup>

Further corroboration: the impossibility of there being order in popular gathering places; the commotion of the malls.<sup>13</sup>

**"YOU'VE NO IDEA HOW MUCH I'VE ADVANCED SINCE I STARTED THE COURSE.  
I LIFTED MY SELF-ESTEEM TO SUCH A DEGREE THAT I NO LONGER CARE  
ABOUT WHAT THOSE UNAWARE OF MY EXISTENCE THINK OF ME"**

Americanization does not mean mental subjection to the U.S. political system; the proof of this is the international condemnation of the invasion of Iraq. It is, on the other hand, a succession of didactic accommodations that, for a long time now, have also included the masses who, just like the elites, know of no field more fertile internationally for understanding the "philosophy of life" than the universe of self-help, with its inundation of books, discs, leaflets, courses, advice (the recipes for the soul), new sayings and revelations of the secret of success, which among the tens of thousands on offer include cheese thieves, the greatest salesperson in the world

<sup>7</sup> "Sololoy" is an approximation in Spanish phonetic orthography to the "difficult" imported word "celluloid." [Translator's Note.]

<sup>8</sup> This refers to a traditional popular Mexican song, whose first line is "Adiós mi chaparrita, no llores por tu Pancho" (Good-bye my dear, don't cry for your Pancho). [Translator's Note.]

<sup>9</sup> "La Patria es primero," said Vicente Guerrero, general in the Mexican war of independence. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>10</sup> "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz," said nineteenth-century President Benito Juárez. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>11</sup> In a famous taped phone conversation, President Vicente Fox said to Fidel Castro, "Comes y te vas," meaning that latter should not make waves with U.S. President Bush and should withdraw discretely on the occasion of Castro's attendance at a Monterrey summit.

<sup>12</sup> "Como dicen en mi pueblo: haiga sido como haiga sido, yo gané." President Felipe Calderón on doubts about his 2006 election win, reprising a popular (and ungrammatical) saying. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>13</sup> *Malls* in English in the original. [Translator's Note.]

(Jesus Christ), body language techniques to impress your boss (“never breathe too much, it makes you look bad”), and the persuasive promotional offers announcing the combination of advice from This Side as well as the Beyond, making the Ten Commandments the first self-help text in the history of mankind, with a prologue by Jehovah or Yahweh, and the handbook of recipes for success takes the place of prayers that, through repetition, bring about saintliness. Such an abundant output comes with a clear message: “You, who can’t get anything right, if you want to rise higher, you’ve got to go back to the attitude you had in primary school and mentally remain there for the rest of your life. Remember: he who is not like a little child shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” The disavowal of maturity and the splendor of the recipe are techniques that rapidly ensconce themselves in all countries because, it goes without saying, the outcome is known: when it comes to adjusting mentalities, it’s a case of playing follow-the-leader, like in the old children’s game, now pensioned off.

Who doesn’t want to be successful? Who wouldn’t want to memorize the steps for achieving it? A country or a person or a group may fall back on American-style self-help and convert the advice into an ideology. (If the new awareness is not profitable, there’s no point in seeking it.) Compare the campaign memoirs of Marta Sahagún (*The Triumph of the Spirit*), or *God, Please Make Me a Widow*,<sup>14</sup> and you will note, in case of doubt, that self-help is the consolation for mortals that, if you wear the right clothes and use the right gestures, you will be allowed entry to the celestial kingdom.

An enduring example is a (verifiable) anecdote about President Vicente Fox and his cabinet. When the new administration began on the afternoon of December 1, 2000, they assembled to listen to a self-help expert’s talk: “Imagine that you’re all out surfing, you look like beach boys, enjoying yourselves under the hot sun. Suddenly you find yourselves on the crest of a wave, and you see the beach from there. What do you do?” The ministers are disconcerted, they reasonably start to calculate (we may imagine) whether it’s possible to set up desks and telephones in such a place, and then they answer, “We head straight for the beach.” The instructor looks at them pitifully: “No way; that would be the worst thing to do. You should stay right where you are and remain there for the next six years. The most difficult thing in life is to get yourself onto the crest of the wave, and you must never –listen to this– never abandon this position. Heading for the beach means giving up the excitement and possibility of being in office and means confessing to weakness.” Of course, this group “Mexicanized” the lesson: they stayed on the crest of the wave until they made both wave and beach disappear.

<sup>14</sup> *Dios mío, hazme viuda por favor*, by Josefina Vázquez Mota. [Translator’s Note.]



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Although it may be of no help to anyone to rise up the social scale with scientific precision, the fervor for self-help reminds its users how close they are or can be to the only recognized style of modernity. And this promotes the great hope: if the country isn't growing economically, if the technology at hand is not cutting-edge, if your days are humdrum and meager, you still have the option of moving to the other mental time-zone that is another country, where the vulgarization of Americanization-become-utopia reaches its apogee. To start with, self-help reverses the position of the party responsible for the failure: "If right now I am not the best I could be, it is my fault alone. I am a free individual, not the member of a community yoked to lack of ambition; and if I admitted determinism by choosing to be born in a particular time and place, I have no right to change. Self-help yourself, or no one will help you." The moral of the tale (taken from any self-help book): Never tell your boss you're after his job. He could fire you on the spot. Better to tell him you will never be able to replace him; that way he can dismiss you right away with no regrets.

**"I REALIZED THAT TO MY MISFORTUNE, DESPITE MY ATTEMPTS  
AT 'PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERRITORIALIZATION,' I WAS STILL LIVING IN MEXICO.  
THE REASON, I REALIZED, WAS THAT I COULD UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING  
THE NEIGHBORS WERE SAYING"**

The characteristic thing about the Americanization of the masses is the memorization of the lessons repeated in electronic media. Every day expressions are adapted from English with slight changes of meaning. "Happy Birthday" is sung, and bilingualism broadens the vocabulary (just as "Las mañanitas" is still sung to certify that tradition is still there), and if the paradigmatic event is being sought, the celebration will take place in a chain restaurant with the waiters assembled in chorus, and an inkling of Texas in the background. This is already native folklore, but the daily conclusion made by millions of people is a bitter one: "If I want something to happen in my life, I've got to go *there* and make it *there*. If not, I will be resigning myself to being a witness of everything from afar. And if I can't leave, then at least I should imagine I am already somewhere else and that that *there*, even if it is not the U.S., is Americanization." There is one geography for hopes and another for customs.

The problem doesn't lie in the simulation of a journey through space and time, but in the defenselessness of those who embark on it. For the rest, becoming Americanized is not a voluntary act, but something that most often occurs by atmospheric

transmission, and this sharp turn from the conditioned reflex of Midnight Mass toward happy hours<sup>15</sup> does not lead to the obsessive study of a culture, but to the acquisition of appearances. If the number of those indifferent to “de-nationalization” is on the increase, it is because the number of those who have only ever known the country of Mexicanized Americanization is also growing.

If in this globalized era, nations abandon their pretensions of dominance, with the great exceptions of the U.S., China, and Japan, the communities undergoing change remain, and there the form of Americanization chosen is definitive. The most common form to date blends internal heritage with “expropriations.”

### AMERICANIZATION: FABLES AND FURNITURE

There is already a whole stockpile of commonplaces about Americanization whose main problem is inevitable repetition. For critics, Americanization consists of:

- the forced, uncritical, and senseless imitation of all things American;
- the relinquishing of traditions that made up the nation, and the replacement of what is traditional with the pragmatism in fashion;
- the widespread view that it is useless to oppose the (American) monopoly on defining modernity;
- the exchange of deep-seated values of family and religion for the “materialism of consumption.”
- the old game according to which it is better to be the tail of a lion than the head of a mouse: “What use to me are customs I don’t practice or that prevent me from enjoying the world of today?”
- the opportunity to enjoy the opportunities of the age.

**“WHERE AM I COMING FROM, FRIEND? /  
FROM THE HALLOWEEN PARTY I KEEP / TO ONE SIDE OF MY WEEKEND”<sup>16</sup>**

In the preceding lines, both truths and falsehoods are interwoven. Long before the globalization process, governed by the United States as it is, everything was blamed on

<sup>15</sup> *Happy hours* in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>16</sup> The original in Spanish reads, “*Que de dónde, amigo vengo? / Del Halloween que mantengo / a orillas de mi week-end.*” This is an allusion to a song. [Translator’s Note.]

the phenomenon of Americanization: technological progress, societies changing direction, the abandonment of behavior sanctioned by historical loyalties, small or large adjustments in lifestyles, increasing hedonism, the smuggling in of bad habits. As the idea of Americanization burgeons covering anything and everything, the creative efforts of national societies are relegated or dismissed, along with the interaction with the rest of the world's cultures. (It is not a matter of singularity, but of diversity: There are more countries on heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your imperial geography.)

It is an exaggeration to bring so many different things together under the sign of "Americanization," such as: the process that transforms the relationship between society and nature; the reconstruction or new devastation of cities and of urban meaning; the changing rhythms of social life; the transition from the tribal to the nuclear family; the growth of feminist consciousness; the quasi-religious adoption of technology; the entertainment experience and the understanding of the international. The United States (what this term encompasses) is the planetary influence *par excellence* because it is not just the empire, but the laboratory of great transformations, too. However, the tyrannical use of the term "Americanization" throws the process into confusion by making it part of an ancient determinism: too bad, bro or sis, this is where you were born, in the age when history is a PowerPoint parade.

No one denies the weight of the proximity of the Empire and its accumulation of influences and achievements, but the obligatory identification of "Americanization" with "modernization" imposes a single mold on the development of societies. Assigning all the attributes of modernization to a single country corners this development *a priori*, regardless of the degree of singularity each society might contain. The moral here is devastating: why make an effort rather than simply copy? Americanization "Americanizes everything," and the search for a single mentality emerges from the succession of unconditional surrenders to the cultural industries. That's the way it is, and I sometimes imagine that if the Mexican Revolution were to occur today, each army would have its own marketing department and before a battle the leaders would go on presentation tours.

Once it is accepted that you have to fix your gaze across the border<sup>17</sup> in order to modernize, the rest comes naturally. For a limited period traditionalists resist the rush of fads, but they too absorb the changes and add them to their personalities, not without a vague sense of guilt at the betrayal of their Identity or estrangement from it. Hence the sum of "betrayals" in the collective, individual, family, or group memory is also called "Americanization."

<sup>17</sup> *Across the border* in English in the original. [Translator's Note.]

**“IN THIS HOUSE WE’RE MODERN, AND WE DON’T ALLOW SERENATAS  
AT FOUR IN THE MORNING”**

Who fears modernization and who resists the associated weight of changes to family life (in its various modes), freedom of behavior, the influence of the cultural industries (especially comics, Hollywood cinema, the drift of television programming, and the contributions of cable TV), and the instant adaptation of the stream of hits coming out of the United States? Even if some of these come from the U.K. or Japan they require the stamp of American approval to enter Mexico. Manga did not arrive here straight from Tokyo.

Whatever the case, and with whatever definitions are attached to it, Americanization is irreversible and has been for over half a century. Whether judged from a structural or anecdotal point of view, the process is incessant and has grown noticeably in recent years, without the redefined and relocated “national essences” having disappeared. To back up my arguments, I shall resort to *exemplum*:

- An increasing number of government officials, businesspeople, and “opinion leaders” speak as though they were making a slightly confused translation from the English. Spanish syntax barely makes an appearance, though this does not mean the syntactic structure of English can be discerned either. The result is enormously distracting because it is impossible to concentrate on the form or content of what is being said, and because everything is crammed into idiomatic statements: “I’m not interested in what she was trying to say, but in deciding which language the contribution was in originally.” And this, more than a question of Americanization, is a linguistic curiosity.
- A “plagiarism of atmospheres” is produced, whereby notions of elegance, luxury, beauty, modernity and postmodernity are faithfully exported from the United States into the milieu of the upper-middle class and bourgeoisie, in the style of Houston, Los Angeles, New York’s East Side, Dallas, San Diego, and their corresponding malls (a mental gentrification).<sup>18</sup> The result is quite different, however, because to start with, surroundings matter, too, and their very presence opposes the absolute validity of furnishings, color combinations, interior design, and “the joy of living as God wills.” The illusion of finding oneself in Manhattan or just about to commission Frank Gehry with the new building for the holding company<sup>19</sup> or for the Hermosillo Guggenheim is never

<sup>18</sup> *Gentryfication* [sic] in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>19</sup>  *Holding* [sic] in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

a convincing one. To suppose that postmodern architecture and decoration “on the banks of the Hudson” insulate you from national realities is to force upon yourself the idea that not seeing is believing.

- The vocabulary of the last three decades comes almost entirely from English. This is not a problem in itself, but it comes at a time of international educational catastrophe and its consequent linguistic poverty. Using the full range of Spanish becomes unthinkable and the frequent “Anglicisms” –if this term still even makes sense– multiply the number of verbal crutches, more than repeating the Chicano experience of adapting words (for instance: “marketa” for “market”; “What sumara con la doga, run pa cá, run pa allá” for “What’s the matter with the dog? She’s running around in circles.”). So, we might say, the constant use of “chingada”, “cabrón,” or “güey” among young people comes not only from the historic repertoire of “curse” words, but quite clearly from the use of four-letter words in English,<sup>20</sup> where “fuck off” is used as a mere conversational formality. If you want to speak “like a *gringo*,” then the memories of the time when someone would be scandalized by what today are mere adjustments in temperament must be done away with. *You catch my drift, man?*<sup>21</sup>

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A sociologist falls back on a wide-open definition: “What is Mexican is whatever is not *gringo*.” Without giving a direct answer, several analysts and a host of testimonies demonstrate just how arduous it is in the globalized reality to specify what is *gringo* and what is not *gringo* in cultural matters. In 1936, the essayist Jorge Cuesta claims Stendhal as one of his own, and places Federico Gamboa, the author of *Santa*, among the others. Today, how many appropriate the classics of rock “as if on the cusp of an oath”?<sup>22</sup> How many believe in self-help for remodeling their lives? How many want to think in English to drown out the sound of their lives still being pursued in Spanish? It is very simple to define what is *gringo* in relation to the invasion of Iraq, the IMF, migrant-hunting in Arizona, support for the far right in Latin America, imperial superiority, the arrogance of police everywhere and the Second American Century. But for young people who have grown up in the purview of the media –to give an obvious example– access to music produced in the United States or brought into fashion there is considered a basic right. Later the original models may be sub-

<sup>20</sup> Four letter words in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>21</sup> ¿Agarraste la onda, güey? in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>22</sup> “Como en el vértice de un juramento,” from the poem *Mexican Creed* by Ricardo López Méndez.

ject to innovation or may be moved away from, but in cultural terms, what is *gringo* has to an enormous extent stopped representing the other.

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Syncretism anticipates syncretism, and today's fusions foreshadow the infinite combinations of tomorrow. Behind rock music (played, sung, heard) in Mexico, lies the ever unresolved conflict between localism and universality. What is the gang member who says, "We are the top motherfuckers of power" alluding to?<sup>23</sup> To scraps of anarchist ideology? To the verbal repertoire that intimidates and validates him to himself? To a confusion between defenselessness and "obscene" vigor? To a way of speaking that protects him in the absence of interlocutors? The teaching of diversity has been arduous, and rock music has been a generous assistant.

In an interview, the rock musician from Tijuana Javier Bátiz explained his position to the Avándaro Festival (1971):

The proposal [of the festival] brought these destructive groups like Felipe Maldonado of Peace and Love, who on an international radio station broadcasting all the way to Peru and everything, announced, "We're going to sing a song called 'Marijuana'." They didn't cut him off. Then he said, "Fuck anybody who doesn't sing along." As soon as he said that, *click*. Rock-'n'-roll was switched off in Mexico for 20 years. Today there are more positive groups. What's not healthy is that people are confused, thinking that if you swear and show disrespect to homeland and country, to the flag, that's rock-'n'-roll.

In his own way, Bátiz was telling us about one of the meanings of rock music: the struggle against censorship based on clowning around, joking about the most closed of nationalisms on the basis of doing whatever the hell you want, the abolition of language taboos –neither a great victory nor lasting progress. Rock music's contribution to diversity is artistic, sociological, and cultural in the broadest sense. With a "festive genius-spirit" the rock music of counter-cultural spaces has told us about the joys, anger, creative powers, formative limitations, pathos, and tragedy among the young whose perennially-evaporating future lies in the hands of others. No one should minimize this resistance to power of creatively using the zeal for imitation. The right to have other tastes is the intuition of a different kind of life, a plural one, that emerges from unexpected changes.

<sup>23</sup> The slang expression is "Somos la chingada madre del poder."

SECOND EPIGRAPH (TO BE PLACED WHEREVER WANTED)

*A pachuco is a singular being  
But one who should never work,  
And who should be able to handle his honeys,  
So they feel very fain for dancing.*

*Any sister who wants to be happy,  
With a guy who has his flings,  
Should go home and get her suitcase,  
And then go to work to support the joker.*

Song by Tin Tan from 1942 or 1943

“IF WE DON’T PROTECT IT, THE SPANISH LANGUAGE  
IS GOING TO FEEL INCOMMUNICADO”

In retreat or confined to its “impregnable” citadels, cultural nationalism, the point where the old left meets the monolingual right, from different perspectives but with a very similar emphasis, squanders its anti-technological warnings, displays its puerile fear in the face of the onslaught of *Spanglish*, and complains about the disappearance of its grand traditions (the right: respect for your elders, the ideas of morality, and good manners; the left: the utterance of slogans like prophecies before the ruins of the empire).

Attempts were made to establish the indisputable canon that would lay hold of the language like a defenseless creature (the Committees for Defense of the Spanish Language), but they ignored the obvious: if English has invaded the spheres of other languages to such a degree, it is for reasons that are hard to do anything about: the military, economic, technological and cultural (in the broad sense) power of the United States, from where the *lingua franca* that produces new terms for the whole world emerges. Every day a word –software, videoclip– enters the international dictionary with no possible alternative. God is the only chip<sup>24</sup> of transcendence. And nonetheless, at the end of a century of Americanization, the Spanish of Mexico, impoverished and enriched, retains its vital rhythms.

The nationalist sectors confront Americanization with gestures and discourses that, failing to even dent it, facilitate its rapidly increasing pace. The mistake was enormous, and has lasted too long: technological progress was identified with American

<sup>24</sup> *Chip* in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

ideology; culture was confused with the acquisition of material goods; and the renunciation of innovation and creature comforts was –almost– demanded in the name of nationalism. Once the light or onerous sense of guilt had passed, those who accepted technology thereby felt themselves to be Americanized. Later, globalization, as a technique to achieve obedience, stands on the shoulders of the vain terrors of a feeble nationalism, turning the misgivings into nightmares. Hence, more often than not resistance to Americanization is rhetorical, because seduction is not in principle ideological, but technological: how do you say no to comfort? Above all, who refuses to live in a fragment of the future, even for an instant? For too long the question has been posed: how contemporary am I? Strictly speaking, this means: how close am I to the American model? With this is declared the national variable of discomfort or backwardness or the classic early twentieth-century fear of the telephone: “How can you hear at a distance with this device? It’s the devil’s work.” Just that puerile, just that inevitable.

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Every day, whether consciously or not, and regardless of the evidence of its disintegration, anachronism is everything distant from the American paradigms. Other societies may be freer or less repressive –Scandinavia, let’s say– but according to the criterion that dominates in Latin America, progress is determined by the United States, and hence the abrupt ideological changes that come with fashion (the bikini or miniskirt become widespread when pride in the body overcomes the fear of What People Will Say); the increasingly easygoing nature of family relationships; the stamp of “efficient” or “inefficient” that determines the future of traditions (from the use of Indigenous languages to adultery; from the rejection of queers to “I told my son, I’m not homophobic, but you and your little gay friend are not welcome in this house”); the increase in options for home schooling in childhood and adolescence; the changing status of women; tolerance as renewal of socialization.

Almost as an exception, in the case of Americanization the dominant ideas of the age are those of the ruling class: according to the High-Income Group’s logic, “becoming-gringo” is the only known strategy for becoming part of what is worthwhile. In their view, the world revolves around a single notable lifestyle, and New York and Houston and Dallas and Los Angeles are well worth previously inadmissible certainties: that daughters leave their puberty and virginity behind them at the same time; that matrimonial infidelity runs both ways; built-in obsolescence also affects beliefs; prejudices retire, too. How much are you going to lose if you relinquish an idiosyncrasy that “has no market value”? This position leads to pathetic



consequences: “Underdevelopment as a state of mind occurs,” says Ivan Illich, “when mass needs are emptied into the mold of the urgent demand for new brands of packaged solutions that are forever beyond the reach of the majority.”

### **GENESIS IS BROADCAST ON FREE-BROADCAST TELEVISION, BUT THE APOCALYPSE WILL BE PPV**

Since the 1970s, the transnationals decide, in an ever-expanding and unrivalled manner, the rituals of life among the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, the direction of children’s recreation, the transitions and very existence of culture for young people, the enjoyable or obligatory use of free time. Before, fads took a while to cross commercial and psychological borders; later this lag was considerably reduced until, thanks above all to Cablevisión and the Web, it reached today’s near-simultaneity among the public with purchasing power and the young. One after another, America’s institutions of taste and consumption become those of Latin America: the Oscars ceremony, the Grammys and the Emmys, the Hit Parade, the adoption of cult films,<sup>25</sup> martial arts (the ambition of the Mexican or Peruvian Ninja), rock music as a cross-generational language, childhood as a videogame, even where there is no electricity.

Genuine internationalization and the pathetic or shameless imitation coexist and blend into each other. The acquisition of a competitive mentality is added to the purchase of televisions, transistor radios, blenders, music players, electric washing machines, and computers. The greatest success of the process: the identification in some sectors of Americanization (consumption, pattern adoption) with the rejection of all notions of social justice, and granting a determinant presence to the cultural industries. It’s never such a big deal. Sure, in the mass society there is only room for stentorian versions of the accouterments, customs, speech, sense of humor, and vision of eroticism, but they are not of a Maoist stripe (“all Chinese dress the same”), nor do they guarantee in their forms of resentment a single response. While television covers the whole country, its effects in a low-income neighborhood are very different from those in a nice residential area. Yes, Gwendolyn, there is a class divide in television reception, too.

<sup>25</sup> *Cult films* in English in the original. [Translator’s Note.]

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For the majority, radio and television are their principal source of interaction, and not only areas of entertainment. They are ways of life, which, by paying attention to them –by disdaining any form of educational hierarchy: “I’m so interested in them seeing me that I treat everyone like children”– go some way to compensate for their social limitations. The message is clear: “You have no choice, audience: come to the paradigmatic mirror and see yourselves reflected in these stories/songs/phrases/attitudes; acquire, by contagion, a globalized identity and emotional education.” And if we talk of “cultural manipulation” in this sphere, it is correct but is not enough, that is to say, it is a half-truth. Mass culture acts on those already defeated, and by channeling the defeat, makes exploitation the backdrop that holds up the victims’ melodramatic dreams. The idea of “manipulation” cannot be used in such a hallowed and deterministic manner without accepting that tyranny thus demobilizes forever. And reality offers ample testimonies to the contrary.

In Mexico, the protection of National Identity is constantly invoked, as it is “on the point of going astray” and being lost. “Oh, Mother Identity, protect our essence.” By not specifying the concept, the fear of the disappearance of idiosyncrasy is yet another of the irrational beliefs about the nation. Extremes come together: the solely defensive attitude, the “They Will Not Prevail” of Catholic *criollismo* and chauvinism, is followed by the submission of those who, by embracing the benefits of technology, imagine that the next thing is to joyfully accept mental colonization. And what do they understand by “mental colonization”? In this case, the feeling of not living in two countries simultaneously. To this is added the dehumanization that the idolatrous cult of the market brings with it. Ivan Illich states, “The modern peculiarity that makes it impossible to take advantage of personal talents, shared life, and environmental resources autonomously infects all aspects of life when a professionally-designed commodity manages to replace the use value that has been configured culturally. In this way, the possibility of experiencing personal and social satisfaction outside of the market is destroyed” (*Alternativas II*).

### THIRD EPIGRAPH: THE DAWN OF GLOBALIZATION

*Now everyone knows who they work for.  
I translate an article from Esquire  
on a sheet from Kimberley Clark Corp.  
with an old Remington typewriter.*

*I'll correct it with an Esterbrook pen.  
What they pay me  
will put a few pesos into the coffers  
of Carnation, General Foods, Heinz,  
Colgate Palmolive, Gillette,  
and the California Packing Corporation.  
José Emilio Pacheco*

In Latin America the phenomenon of Americanization merges indistinguishably with that great game of reality substitution known as cultural imperialism and today is the transnational network of cultural industries, a term that describes competing and ferociously individualist visions, whose primary *raison d'être* is the massive appropriation of a mentality that is judged to be unique and desirable, and whose mode of conquest demands that the prerequisite for enjoyment of the scientific and technological advances be to accept the determinisms of Americanization.

Irrationality and dispersal. The distance between personal development (what exists) and the requirements of collective development (which does not occur) prevails not only in the dwellings of the middle class, but also in shacks, in hovels, in the desolation ruled over by scarcity where the multitudes huddle. In terms of ideological acquisitions, feelings of wellbeing or survival depend to an enormous degree on electronic media, with a result that is emblematic of hegemony: the oppressed are not able to draw final conclusions about the nature of their oppression. In exchange, they are offered a bundle of vicarious hopes and scant recompense at a very high cost, synonymous with the consumer society. The onslaught of the transnationals is opposed only by a few key elements: education, the power of selection of traditions—something more important than idiosyncrasy, in my view—and the dose of sensuality, humor, and tomfoolery that provide variation to survival.

With the obligatory optical distortion, immigrants prefer to be third-class citizens of the future rather than of the past. Once stigmatized by governments from both left and right, Americanization is no longer a pressing issue. It is an intensified version of something only discussed for rhetorical purposes, something omnipresent, completing the set of nationalisms, and overpowering, because it makes no sense to oppose comfort and the sensations of contemporary life, just as it makes no sense to stick to “national values” without being buried beneath suffocating localism. For many “the national” is a variable of the lack of alternatives, and the axis of seduction is not ideology, but technology. The irrationality of always being on the defensive, the “They Will Not Prevail” of the “criollo essence,” is succeeded by the irrationality

of believing that the only possible condition for being “up to date” is a pact with a world view which is solely known for the vulgarity of its proposals.

## ON PUERILITY AS THE LEGAL AGE TO WHICH CONSUMERS HAVE ACCESS

Much of what is understood by Americanization depends on the puerility of its clients or believers. Mythologies of life and behavior are naively adopted from America, and by “North America” is understood the blend of conditioned reflexes of the consumer society, the veneration of successive fads, and the mechanical translation of points of view and the cult of technology. It is not imprecise to speak of *puerility*; strictly speaking, there is nothing more puerile than treating the most basic ways of thinking as highways to civilization.

To give a vertiginous example: for over a decade now –and without anyone wanting to escape it– marketing has become the touchstone of social and political certainties in Mexico, an element that modifies mentalities to a greater degree than people like to admit. Now that demagoguery has lost its captive audience, and that the effects of direct mobilization have been negated by the population explosion, political marketing is seeking –with regular successes– to become the sanctuary of credibility, the devotional path to knowledge and information, the replacement of experience with opinion polls and image consultants. In the imaginary of politicians, the voice of the opinion poll is the voice of God, focus groups almost wholly replace public opinion, the electorate lasts for as long as the ad campaigns do, and whatever happens outside of the marketing exercise is so pre-modern that, through the lens of political groups, it doesn’t happen at all. Even so, polls can be surprising. In a 2004 survey, 35 percent decided they didn’t believe in the physical existence of Juan Diego. Who’d’a thunk it?

## ON SOME ADVANTAGES OF THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Tit for tat. In recent years, a feature of the cultural industries has been to commercially recreate the watchwords and positions of a number of U.S. social, democratic, and libertarian movements. The contribution of these openings to the growth of tolerance, the increasing acceptance of the rights of minorities, and the incorporation of the advances of feminism is enormous. As has occurred with the rhythm of freedoms in U.S. cinema, there are television series that under the aegis of Americanization’s prestige, contribute to the broadening of criteria the world over.

Is it possible to appraise what a series like *Oz* has meant for the understanding of prison life and all the different kinds of violence it involves? And who would have expected to see, by way of a “dysfunctional” family running a funeral home, a respectful approach to wakes, as in *Six Feet Under*? How can we appreciate the transformation of children’s humor brought about by the animated series *The Simpsons* and *South Park*? How can we evaluate the normalization of the lesbian experience fostered by *The L Word*, and of the gay experience in the care of *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Noah’s Arc*? What about the approaches to the sexual and emotional lives of young women in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*? With the failure of censorship, freedoms continue to gain ground.

#### FOURTH EPIGRAPH

*Sorry, no tengo cash.*  
President Ernesto Zedillo,  
to an indigenous woman who  
sold him an image of  
Our Lady of Guadalupe  
made from palm leaves (1996)