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A Kinder, Gentler Americanization? Transnational Cool and the TV Series *30 Rock*

“More than jazz or musical theater or morbid obesity, television is the true American art form.”
Kenneth Purcell

Introduction

Even before it turned international, American popular culture had already been thoroughly transnational. Characterized by industrial modes of production, mass appeal, and commercial orientation, the popular culture that emerged in the nineteenth century against the background of a multiethnic society is a cultural phenomenon that prefigured global popular cultures and always already defied containment in essentialist national narratives (Kelleter, “Jazz Singer” 112). Between the difficulty to address multiethnic and multilingual audiences and the opportunity to use a multicultural creative pool, it developed ingenious solutions for the problem of turning a profit in its respective sociocultural context. As a result, U.S. popular culture has been primarily characterized by two processes: First, the constant appropriation, mixing, and merging of different cultural material, “a constant mixture and hybridization of aesthetic modes and forms of expression” (Fluck, “Abroad” 53). Because of these “parasitic” processes of appropriation, American cultural artifacts and performances were continually characterized by their producers’ ability to come up with new, though not necessarily original, products, practices, and narratives (Kelleter, “Jazz Singer” 112). Second, popular culture has been marked by a constant development towards simplification and “re-duction in cultural literacy” (not necessarily in the sense of trivial-

ization), which broadened accessibility by increasingly relying on audio/visual cultural forms like film, television, music, or comics (Fluck, "California" 226).

In the twentieth century, often dubbed the "American" century, this transnational popular culture became increasingly international, and its influence on foreign cultures came to be called Americanization. However, in a similar vein, the Americanization had a long domestic tradition before it turned international, and was similarly marked by the transnational need to address wildly divergent audiences: "In other words, before the Americanization of other societies could occur, American culture itself had to be 'Americanized'" (Fluck, "California" 225). Fluck does not speak so much of the spreading of U.S. ideology and capitalism but rather about processes of "self-Americanization," in which the semantics of the term are related to the imaginary (self-)empowerment of the individual subject within society through culture ("California" 223).

And yet, taking into account the structural fluidity and ethnic diversity of U.S. popular culture as well as its emphasis on the individual subject, for the better part of the twentieth century, one prominent approach to the international impact of U.S. popular culture has been characterized by fears of cultural homogenization. Especially in connection to mass culture theory and the Frankfurt School, U.S. popular culture became synonymous with a hopelessly commercial culture of the copy, devoid of originality and posing a threat to cultural diversity around the globe. To a certain extent, this discourse has even gained new momentum in recent years with the global conglomeration of media corporations under an American umbrella (McGuigan 150; cf. Pearson). And yet, over and beyond Fluck's semantic expansion of the term, a closer look at even the most often cited cultural forces of homogenization discloses that it is increasingly pointless to apply theories of mass culture to them. Whether we look at Hollywood cinema, the music industry, literature, comics, or television, the various subsections of U.S. popular culture are increasingly made up of parallel, often conflicting (sub-)cultures and fields between independent and mainstream. Within these dynamics of distinction and hierarchization, the only remotely unifying factor is in fact its national heritage and, to a decreasing amount, its anglophone nature. It becomes increasingly apparent that it is rather the division into discrete, highly hierarchized fields that characterizes the production, distribution, and reception of a

popular culture whose main homogenizing force is its heterogeneity. This is not necessarily, even hardly ever, commensurate with a counter-hegemonic diversity envisioned by post-colonial or cultural studies theorists in the last decades, but rather the outcome of a major development in the hegemonic structure itself. Rather than imposing a homogeneous culture on global audiences, recent media products are marked by a thoroughly American aesthetics of difference that is as much at odds with mainstream corporate culture as it is suffused by it.

In the following, I want to trace the representation and perpetuation of this cultural trend in the U.S. television comedy series *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-) and its aesthetics of cool, and then point out the particular transnational cultural work that *30 Rock* performs within the diversifying system of this "true American art form," as the NBC page Kenneth in a sense very accurately calls television. In the aesthetics of *30 Rock*, Americanization emerges as a narratively oblique, but nonetheless potent process of reproducing the subject in the context of contemporary consumer culture across national borders as a simultaneously defiant and productive part of capitalism.

Television and Americanization

Next to film and popular music, television has often been identified as a principal agent of Americanization, even outright cultural imperialism. Against these mono-causal assumptions of U.S. influence on both American and global cultures, cultural studies soon set their model of subversive reception. Ien Ang's research on the quintessential capitalist series *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991) showed how global audiences read it against the grain and saw it more as an incentive to reflect critically on U.S. capitalism and the chauvinistic tendencies of U.S. culture than to buy into U.S. capitalist ideology (Mittell 442; cf. Fiske). This view has remained influential until today, as the following recent quote from television scholar Jason Mittell attests:

We must remember that viewers around the world, as well as in the United States, actively negotiate with American television rather than passively consuming it, and frequently watch such shows as commentaries on America, not simple vehicles for embracing American values.

While we might cringe at the idea that millions of viewers around the world might see *Baywatch* as a representation of American culture, we should remember that they might view the show with cynicism and camp pleasure as much as seeing it as a simplistic celebration of beautiful people on a beach. (442)

This argument certainly has its merits and accurately describes a prominent form of reception. Still, it rests on two problematic assumptions when it comes to understanding popular culture: First, as Fluck has shown, it is still an essentially defensive argument that valorizes popular culture only through its audiences' defiance to buy into its cheap effects and homogenizing tendencies ("California" 227). Second, if global audiences are indeed as irreverent and subversive as many cultural studies scholars since the 1980s have assumed them to be and are therefore immune to the baseness of popular culture, we are facing an interesting paradox when it comes to contemporary television: Many recent television series, in accordance with large parts of popular culture, are obviously aware of this audience subversiveness and even seem to agree with it; moreover, they deliver the irreverent criticism which is already built-in (Dunne 3-17; cf. Mayer). This kind of "pre-emptive irony" (Miller 14), so typical for television from *David Letterman* to *The Simpsons*, is marked by a self-denigrating irony in which televisual products deride first and foremost themselves. In the context of U.S. television, this was often read along the lines of deflecting criticism of the televisual product (Miller 1-27; cf. Wallace).

With the more recent example of *30 Rock*, which partakes in a similar rhetorical strategy, I will argue for a slightly different function, especially when it comes to the transnational cultural work of the series. The show's self-consciously ironic aesthetics is a form of Americanization that emphatically defies homogenization or standardization and rather criticizes its own connection to the culture industry while at the same time functioning smoothly within contemporary popular culture. Furthermore, it problematizes antagonistic relationships between audiences and the culture industry, art and economy, and, maybe most centrally, bourgeois and bohemian social stances.

30 Rock derives its title from NBC's headquarter address, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, and is a self-consciously ironic NBC-comedy about the production of *TGS with Tracy Jordan*, a live-action variety NBC show reminiscent of NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (NBC,

1975-). Fittingly, *SNL's* creator and producer Lorne Michaels is also the executive producer of *30 Rock*, and former *SAL*-head writer and actress Tina Fey is the creator, head writer and protagonist of *30 Rock*. Fey is cast as *TGS's* head writer Liz Lemon, a middle-aged woman constantly struggling with her private life, but especially with her team of writers, her actors, and the new network executive Jack Donaghy. As such, *30 Rock* hybridizes the premises of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-66) and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-77) and updates them for the aughts, with an explicit self-referential emphasis that gives it a postmodern twist.

With respect to the current critical reception of television, Mary Tyler Moore certainly is a good cue, as the series from her production house MTM Enterprises were among the first to be associated with Quality TV, a term that by now has become virtually synonymous with the critical valorization of large parts of U.S. primetime television series (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi). In his 1996 *Televisions Second Golden Age*, Robert J. Thompson included a 12-point list of what defines Quality TV and significantly begins with the claim that "Quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not 'regular' TV" (13). From here, it is but one step to premium cable channel HBO's famous advertising slogan "It's not TV. It's HBO," introduced only a year later. Distinct from a supposed standard network fare, Quality TV highlights its different approach to television through an appeal to modernist aesthetics of self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and innovation (Collins 196; cf. Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 44). And from the beginning, *30 Rock* also self-consciously addresses the aesthetics of distinction described by Thompson and utilized by HBO. In the pilot episode, during Liz's negotiations with the movie actor Tracy Jordan, the following dialogue ensues:

Liz: So Tracy, let's talk about the show.

Tracy: You know, I want it to be raw. HBO style content.

Liz: Well, it's not HBO. It's TV.

In this short dialogue, the show openly mocks HBO's highly successful slogan and at the same time self-consciously mirrors itself in exactly those strategies of televisual self-fashioning typical of the Quality TV discourse. As a consequence, Liz Lemon's low estimation of her own variety show and the synecdochic use of "TV"

for low cultural value as opposed to HBO's more refined aesthetics do not apply to *30 Rock*, which aligns itself more with the latter's status through this display of self-consciousness.

The rise of Quality TV also saw the rise of convergence culture, where television technology increasingly merges with computers and particularly the internet, a development which created new ways of transnationalizing U.S. television (Jenkins 1-24). Of course, television as a technology was always readymade for transnational impact. And yet, primarily due to technological constraints and government regulation, it developed in discrete national ways. For decades, television existed primarily as a nationally bound medium that spawned certain international franchises, but stuck with significantly national symbolic regimens. It is therefore still valid to claim that "precise situations diverge enough to make it difficult to speak in transnational generalities" (Lotz 6). Still, Lotz correctly asserts in her analysis of "post-network television" that the current redefinition of television marked by technological convergence, economic conglomeration, the increasing importance of niche audiences, and the increasingly active role of television viewers is a shared experience among industrialized nations that increasingly transcends national borders (7). In this scheme, U.S. television products follow a two-fold path: On the one hand, they continue to be among the most dominant cultural texts in various other (Western) countries. On the other hand, instead of sheer dominance through numbers, parts of U.S. television now gain dominance through appeal to different audiences and international critical valorization:

At least in the western world, the most legitimated of American series are warmly received, airing on terrestrial, cable, and satellite television, as well as leading robust lives on DVD. The global reach of American television is not news, of course, but the convergence-era legitimation of American TV may point to a new implication of that reach: a global circulation of legitimation discourses, whether moving from the U.S. outward or enhancing those discourses with the U.S. by virtue of their international reinforcement. (Newman and Levine 11)

Here, a certain irony emerges: while Americanization through television was often read in the framework of dumbing down and homogenization, Americanization under the new media paradigm might well manufacture the (almost) exact opposite: the reinforcement of cultural distinctions and social divisions and, even more

striking, a consequent heterogenization of culture(s) across national borders. In this light, Christine Geraghty's cautious words on the dominance of U.S. television in the U.K. market are indicative:

It does seem there's a lot of snobbery at work when the media industry spends so much time talking and writing about a handful of shows that are largely watched by people like them [...] I wonder whether we are capable of having a debate about popular drama that includes other shows - shows that reach a broader audience and include a wider part of the creative community - or whether the media will remain obsessed with *Mad Men*, *30 Rock*, and *The Wire*. (qtd. in Newman and Levine 12)

Both Geraghty's lament as well as her choice of examples is significant. By lamenting that critically acclaimed shows primarily watched by affluent and well-educated audiences dominate the television discourse, she presents the full inversion of the Americanization as homogenization discourse - the current product rather is cultural snobbery U.S. style. And it unites a transnational audience of affluent and well-educated viewers and critics for whom class, status, and taste are more important markers than sheer nationality. *30 Rock*, in turn, is not only produced by and representing exactly those media professionals Geraghty speaks of, but it also addresses an audience that, at least symbolically, also fits this professional paradigm.

Transnational *30 Rock*

“In order that capitalism could come to dominate other ways of life, it had to originate somewhere as a *modus vivendi* common to whole groups of man.”

Jack Donaghy reading Max Weber

30 Rock features distinction and difference in two ways, both of which point to a markedly transnational dimension. On the level of visual aesthetics, it distinguishes itself from standardized U.S. sitcoms like *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003-).¹ Rejecting this quintessentially American genre's standard ingredients, the show uses a filmic single camera setup, eschews a laugh track and is framed and

1 For a more thorough analysis of contemporary experiments with visual style in the U.S. sitcom, see Butler (173-222).

edited in a style reminiscent of the British mockumentary format, which fittingly spawned one of the most prominent international TV franchises: *The Office* (cf. Mills 91). And with its story of office workers in a paper company, it certainly puts occupation above national identity - deriding the global white collar workforce and depicting them as a homogenous mass of discontented work drones.² As we will see below, *30 Rock* also depicts professionals, but frames their work in considerably different terms.

It is on the narrative level that *30 Rock's* transnational dimension comes most prominently to the fore. To be sure, *30 Rock's* narrative as such is hardly what one usually deems transnational. In fact, it is a very U.S.-centered show, seemingly more occupied with the domestic divisions between red and blue America and coastland and heartland than with America's place in the world. Among the only instances when the show openly addresses issues that transcend the U.S. realm, is with respect to the global conglomeration of enterprises, exemplified most prominently in a scene when Jack Donaghy explains a diagram that shows the convoluted ownership structure of NBC: "You see, GE owns Kitchen All of Colorado, which in turn owns JMI of Stamford which is a majority shareholder in Pokerfastlane.com which recently acquired the Sheinhardt Wig Company which owns NBC outright. NBC owns Winnipeg Iron Works which owns the AHP Chanagi Party Meats corporation of Pyongyang, North Korea" (*30 Rock*, "The Rural Juror"). However, similar to the few other cases when the global context is explicitly addressed, it still retains a very American perspective. This becomes especially blatant in a scene when guest star Jerry Seinfeld and Jack Donaghy talk about a "European country only rich people know about" and present the options "Svenborgia" and "Grenyarnia" (*30 Rock*, "Seinfeldvision"). Read superficially then, *30 Rock* is an almost perfect example of an American narrative that suppresses its transnational context, and yet it is thoroughly informed both by and feeding into the transnational dimension of U.S. popular culture.

2 Of course, there are other recent shows one could think of in this context, but international franchises like *The Apprentice* (McGuigan 148), internationally produced shows like *The Simpsons* (Mittell 445-48), or a global success like *Two and a Half Men* seem to be indebted to different transnational phenomena than the one I have in mind here.

The transnational narrative content of *30 Rock*, then, comes in through the backdoor, but is, nonetheless, fundamental to its narrative: *30 Rock* connects its appeal to Quality TV with a highly self-reflexive narrative of non-conformity and resistance to the stifling influence of corporate (U.S.) capitalism. One of the show's major narrative dynamics is the Manichean struggle between creative and commercial factions. Jack Donaghy, the "Head of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming" (*30 Rock*, "Pilot"), frequently interferes in the production of the show on behalf of General Electric, then NBC's major shareholder, and is portrayed as the economic antagonist of the creative team around Liz Lemon. To a large extent, the dichotomy between Donaghy and Lemon's team runs along the lines of 'hip,' 'bohemian' creativity, and 'square,' 'bourgeois' conformity. This is already evident when we compare the sartorial tastes of writer Frank Rossitano and Donaghy. Rossitano is both the epitome and caricature of the laidback, irresponsible hipster, complete with ironic trucker hats and nerd glasses, while Donaghy is portrayed as a suit-wearing Republican who is very much the avatar of neoliberalism, and puts on tuxedos because "it's after six, what am I, a farmer?" (*30 Rock*, "Tracy Does Conan"). For Donaghy, money and power is everything: "I have faith, in things I can see and buy and deregulate. Capitalism is my religion" (*30 Rock*, "St. Valentine's Day"). Therefore, it is fitting that he reads exactly that part of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* to his dying mentor which is most centrally devoted to the emergence of organized capitalism, which in turn was written by Weber based on the impressions of his travel through the U.S. (*30 Rock*, "Sandwich Day"; cf. Scaff). And yet, this is not the capitalism imagined by *30 Rock*; rather, with its carnivalesque mixture of modes and its open criticism of organized capitalism, it is part of a capitalism that supersedes the capitalism described by Weber and (at least in part) embodied by Donaghy.

There can be little doubt that *30 Rock* is firmly entrenched in capitalist structures. While the show points out television's connections to contemporary developments of conglomeration and vertical integration (Caldwell 66-69), it uses these parts also to promote products from its parent company. Here, certainly the most blatant instance can be found in the episode "Seinfeldvision," in which Donaghy includes computer renderings of Jerry Seinfeld in current

NBC shows - without Seinfeld's permission. When Seinfeld finds out, he confronts Jack, and in this episode originally broadcast on October 4, Jack makes the following offer: "Alright listen Seinfeld, I'll give you one million dollars, and five free commercials for your animated feature *Bee Movie*. And you let me run this for one week." Seinfeld reacts by demanding "[t]wo million dollars to the charity of my choice, ten free commercials for *Bee Movie*, opening November 2nd. And I do nothing" (*30 Rock*, "Seinfeldvision," emphasis added). The exact moment when Jerry Seinfeld discloses *Bee Movie's* U.S. opening date, he looks into the camera, telling this directly to the audience. Presented in the form of postmodern self-reflexivity, Seinfeld's breaching of the fourth wall to promote a Universal movie on the affiliated NBC network is a blatant form of exploiting vertical integration. Again, the narrative content is primarily addressing a U.S. audience, but the effects point beyond any national borders. And by stressing the need for television to address specific target groups, Donaghy points in the right direction to understand this: "I've spent the better part of the last three years developing a portable, miniature microwave oven. Most of that time has been spent coming up with a hip, edgy name for the product, something that will appeal to the marketing Holy Trinity - college students, the morbidly obese, and homosexuals" (*30 Rock*, "The Funcooker"). Comically exaggerated as they may be, both of these scenes lead us to an aspect I think is central for an understanding of *30 Rock's* transnational aesthetics.

The show mocks, criticizes and debunks corporate America and the global impact of U.S. media through a self-conscious commentary on its own machinations and thereby addresses a global audience of 'hip, edgy' consumers well versed in and yet critical of U.S. (popular) culture. For instance, beyond vertical integration, it also thematizes one of its principal means of making money: product integration / placement. In times of diminished revenue from the classic 30-second commercials, the sponsored integration of products into the narrative of series has become one of the most important ways of financing a show, as deals between the producers of *Chuck* (NBC, 2007-) and Subway or the ubiquity of Apple computers on television shows like *30 Rock* might attest. *30 Rock* addresses this in a number of episodes, the most prominent of which may be taken to be "Jack-Tor." In this episode, whose A-plot revolves around Donaghy's plan to implement product integration

in *TGS with Tracy Jordan*, three scenes stand out. In the first, Liz and her team are informed of this plan and fundamentally oppose “using the show to sell stuff” because this would mean “compromising the integrity of the show to sell.” Just when Liz is about to finish defending her artistic integrity, she is interrupted by this sequence:

Pete: Wow, this is diet Snapple?
 Liz: I know, it tastes just like regular Snapple, doesn't it?
 Frank: You should try pomegranate. It's amazing.
 Cerie [to the camera]: I only date guys who drink Snapple.
 Jack: Look, we all love Snapple. Lord knows I do, but focus here. We're talking about product integration.

In this sequence, *30 Rock* implements product integration at the same time that it ridicules any attempt to produce television with modernist cultural integrity. Not surprisingly, while the blunt self-reflexive play with this is continued, it also alludes to avatars of ‘pure’ art in the rest of the sequence:

Liz: We're not your skills.
 Jack: Oh, oh. I'm sorry. That's right, they're artists. Like James Joyce, or Strindberg. Get real kids. You write skits mocking our presidents to fill time between car commercials.
 Liz: That's not fair. Josh gets a lot of fan mail for Gaybraham Lincoln.
 Josh: Four score and seven beers ago.
 Liz [inspecting a Snapple lid's inside]: Did you guys know that Holland is the only country with a national dog?

In a later scene, we see Liz and Pete going to the elevator:

Pete: I can't believe you guys actually wrote a product integration sketch.
 Liz: Jack said we had to.
 Pete: It just seems weird. The show's not a commercial. (*30 Rock*, “Jack-Tor”)

Again, just as Pete is saying these lofty words, they are interrupted when the elevator door opens, revealing a man in a giant Snapple costume asking the way to human resources. And when they eventually talk to Donaghy again about their ingenious solution to the creative problem of including product integration, the show goes even a step further:

Jack: What can I do for you?
 Liz: So we wrote a product integration sketch...

- Jack: Good!
- Liz: [...] but we wanted to run it by you first because it's about how GE is making us do this, and we were kind of hoping that the GE executive in the sketch, could be played by - you!
- Jack: Oh I get it. The whole self-referential thing. Letterman hates the suits. Stern yells at his boss, Nixon says 'sock it to me' on *Laugh In*. Yeah. Hippie humor. (*30 Rock*, "Jack-Tor")

At first glance, this is the self-reflexive ironic treatment of the show's own capitalist machinations along the lines of pre-emptive irony. And yet, especially with the last sequence, it goes a step beyond that by self-reflexively dissecting this very move through Donaghy's awareness of it. This is not Letterman ridiculing TV's badness, this is *30 Rock* ridiculing somebody like Letterman ridiculing TV's badness. As we can see in these scenes, the show merges actual product integration with self-reflexive humor and signals that it is already aware of its own ironic complicity with consumer capitalism. Moreover, Jack Donaghy's awareness of the potential of "Hippie humor" - he eventually agrees to do the sketch - symbolizes how corporate capitalism is aware of the increasing impact of hipness and non-conformity.

30 Rock is thus highly self-reflexive of its own status as both international commodity product and broker. And still, it continues to successfully signify hip- and edginess through the use of avant-garde styles and narratives, and the latter retain its rebellious and non-conformist connotations even though they have been repeatedly used by the mainstream. Read along these lines, *30 Rock* perpetuates a development that Jim McGuigan has called "cool capitalism," whose major aspect "is the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself" (1). McGuigan draws heavily on Thomas Frank's study *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), in which Frank traced "the bohemian cultural style's trajectory from adversarial to hegemonic" (8), that is, the development of countercultural values since the 1960s and the central place dissent and defiance have in today's popular culture. Frank's influential twist was that he explained the integration of the counterculture into consumerist schemes through their very compatibility with capitalism rather than the nefarious co-optation of them by an inherently antagonistic system. This "commodification of deviance" (Frank x) led to a "hip consumerism driven by disgust with mass society itself [...] a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppres-

sions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption” (Frank 28, 31). From here, it is but one step to reading Quality TV, and especially Quality TV with a narrative like *30 Rock*, as a form of hip television that is informed by and feeds into its audience’s disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of regular TV. Several ironies are at work here, but the most blatant may well be that the Americanization of *30 Rock* is one that sees U.S. popular culture to a large extent along the lines of commercial homogenization and sets its own distinct aesthetics against it, while at the same time acknowledging itself as quintessentially American. Much like organized capitalism has strong ties to the turn-of-the-century U.S., the phenomena of “hip consumerism” and “cool capitalism” are parts of a way of life that currently becomes increasingly dominant in Western industrialized societies and originated in the U.S. as a *modus vivendi* common to whole groups of consumers (McGuigan 9-44).

As McGuigan correctly points out, Frank analyzes this development as a quintessentially American phenomenon, and the book hardly goes beyond the U.S. borders. In McGuigan’s study, both the purview as well as the assumption regarding this form of consumerism, or in McGuigan’s sense capitalism, are broadened: “cool capitalism is now a too deeply entrenched and pervasive phenomenon to be limited to the particular history of how US capitalism turned cool” (7-8; cf. Heath and Potter). McGuigan argues that the integration of the “great refusal,” ideas and political stances associated with aesthetic movements of dissent like Romanticism, the Historical Avant-garde, and postmodernism, is integral to this development (45-82). With respect to the transnational potential of cool, it is of course notable that all three of them were among the most prominent transnational aesthetic phenomena of their day. Even more, as Andreas Huyssen has shown, postmodernism was to a large extent the American renaissance of the European Historical Avant-garde movements (vii-xii, 179-221). Now, as it travels back across the Atlantic in the form of self-reflexive television, the integration of these adversary aesthetics fuels contemporary consumerism in Western industrialized societies through an emphasis on defiance, distinction, and non-conformity.³ In terms of Mar-

3 In the case of *30 Rock*, it is an interesting coincidence that Rockefeller Center is one of the most famous examples of the confluence of corporate capital

cuse, this form of co-optation would be a blatant form of “repressive desublimation,” as it incorporates subversive ideas and channels them into “politically unthreatening forms” (Graff 170). The picture is, however, a little bit messier. Eric Lott has already shown in his study on blackface how the dialectics of love and theft, of “genuine embrace and cultural disappropriation” are structural aspects of U.S. popular culture, and cannot be reduced to corporate schemes (Kelleter, “Jazz Singer” 111, my translation).

Through a specifically ‘American’ narrative of appropriation and aesthetic expression, shows like *30 Rock* construct a particular transnational audience defined by a common popular culture literacy rather than discrete national cultures of taste. Its mocking representation of U.S. capitalism supports a contemporary inflection of Americanization, but one that clearly highlights the futility of popular terms like imperialist ‘Coca-Colonization’ or standardizing McDonaldization. As Fluck has shown, U.S. popular culture has a long tradition of symbolically producing the exact opposite of homogeneity - it highlights and supports processes of cultural pluralization and individualization in the sense of increasing emancipation from social and cultural norms. In this vein, *30 Rock’s* narrative and style of championing non-conformity stands in a long cultural tradition - and still has to be read against its own historical context. The imagined - and actual - global community of shows like *30 Rock* consists of active and subversive viewers who are members of globalized subcultures critical of globalized U.S. capitalism, for instance the pop-culture savvy culture-jammers and anti-corporatists that Kalle Lasn and Naomi Klein are so fascinated with. *30 Rock* takes up frequent fears of Americanization and symbolically disperses them through its narrative and (visual) style, thereby addressing niche audiences that can be found in various countries.

It is not without irony, but also for good reason, that these groups are the major consumers of a thoroughly American product tailored to their specific tastes by a culture industry that obviously

and art, as it was commissioned by the Rockefeller family in the 1920s and 1930s and ornamented with numerous avant-garde artworks. That the most prominent piece, Diego Rivera’s epic fresco, fell victim to political dissonances between Rivera and Nelson Rockefeller may symbolize the limits of the corporate-creative partnership in that period.

imagines a strikingly similar group. ‘Cool’ emerges as a commercial narrative that transcends borders and yet remains thoroughly American. There can be little doubt that this process leads to a certain commodification of difference, as McGuigan has argued:

In truth, cool brands are the bearers of cultural homogeneity, effectively marketing sameness all around the world. [...] It is an extraordinary ideological trick to advertise products to millions and millions of people with the message that association with the brand - branding your self - delivers individuality, the mark of difference, the paradoxical myth of non-conformist conformity. (200)

Furthermore, with reference to Thomas Frank’s “market populism,” McGuigan has argued that “[t]he legitimacy of market forces in any sphere of life, consumer sovereignty, [...] ‘cool’ culture and the argot associated with it, all these elements emanate from the United States but are now global in their reach, representing the popular appeal of neoliberalism around the world” (137). Mc-Guigan claims that in connection with the cool rhetoric of non-conformist individuality, the sovereign consumer envisioned by cultural studies comes dangerously close to neoliberal fantasies often ascribed to U.S. capitalism. Yet, as intuitively true as this statement might be, I would argue that it does not go far enough. Just like cultural studies’ essentially defensive argument that people appropriate texts in subversive ways and are therefore turning ‘mass’ into ‘popular’ culture (Fiske 60-64), McGuigan’s fear rests on a questionable binary opposition between consumers and producers. Furthermore, it assumes intentions which are too simplistic and fails to account for the variety of possible effects. We cannot rule out that the corporate criticism voiced in *30 Rock* actually functions as such, even though it might be intended to perform the completely opposite work. And of course, we also have to keep in mind that something may have been intended as creative play but is read as cynical machination; supposedly, the Snapple scenes were not intended as product integration. In the end, it is only through the process of reception, ranging from affirmative to subversive, that we can determine its ultimate effect.

Moreover, through its highly digressive, self-reflexive narrative, *30 Rock* potentially activates the audience by pointing out the constructedness of the series and thus inviting them to engage critically with the narrative (Simonini). Therefore, it might

hook its audiences even more to the cultural product, but it also gives them the explicit possibility to better understand how consumerism functions, especially that of the 'cool' variety. Thus, it simultaneously stifles the emancipation of the audience and lays the foundation to criticize capitalism. This also has a technological dimension, for the transnational transfer of television fiction has never been easier than in the convergence era, when actual broadcasting is only one among many other distribution options. With the advent of DVDs, online streaming and (illegal) downloads, it is now increasingly up to the audience to decide when to watch what - and it is no longer necessary to wait for a national outlet to buy and broadcast international content. Even more, and this is also true for virtually every scene quoted here, it is a show that activates its audiences on yet another level. Certainly indebted to *30 Rock's* genealogical proximity to the sketch show *Saturday Night Live*, it is sometimes less a coherent narrative than a series of loosely connected bits. These bits, in turn, are almost readymade for upload to YouTube or similar websites, thus integrating the show with one of the principal outlets of globalized video content. Read with Fluck's concept of self-Americanization as aesthetic self-fashioning along the lines of individualization, the aesthetics of *30 Rock* emerge as fitting for today's convergence culture just as much as they are potent vehicles of Americanization. Fluck is also helpful in revealing the limitations of Mc-Guigan's approach when it comes to cultural work of commercial fictions, as he points out the difference between consumption, the "economic term for the process of reception" and the general act of reception, which is a much more individual and precarious activity than critics like McGuigan allow for ("Abroad" 71). For Fluck, individual self-empowerment is a process at least on par with processes of "socialization and integration into a social and ideological consensus" ("Abroad" 72). By highlighting the cultural struggles out of which the show is constructed, *30 Rock* brings to the fore central dynamics of U.S. popular culture and summarizes the precarious relationship between cultural and economic uses of aesthetics. Read like this, the show exhibits less a conflict over the control of aesthetic forms of expression than the aesthetic expression of fluid relationships between culture and economy, audience and producers, and a national vs. transnational understanding of U.S. cultural products.

In recent years, this fluidity has been addressed by an interpretation of professional life that integrates these aspects, as well as bourgeois and bohemian mores (Brooks 43). Therefore, *30 Rock's* imaginary of cool consumerism is also tied to work, and particularly to 'creative' work, or the "creative class" (Florida 8). Florida argues that with ever more people entering or preparing to enter higher education, and with more and more jobs centered on creativity, innovation, and knowledge, 'cultural' sectors and aspects become ever more central to capitalist economy (3-17). Thus, together with the professionalization of cultural studies during the last 40 years, the meticulous knowledge of cultural phenomena has become something that can be turned into actual monetary value, both within the field of cultural studies and higher learning as well as in the field of cultural production. And Liz Lemon and her co-workers, together with Donaghy's capitalist corrective, embody this new, transnational social group that is markedly different from the global white collar workforce of *The Office*, and their negotiation of central cultural dichotomies emerges as a potent address to its audience that (at least symbolically) also performs similar professional functions.

Conclusion

Because of its specific aesthetics, *30 Rock* will certainly never be a runaway global blockbuster like *Dallas*, with its hundreds of millions of viewers worldwide. *30 Rock's* audience of roughly five million viewers in the U.S. and, for instance, only a few thousand in Germany, pales in comparison, even if we take into account online viewing and digital storage media. Yet, it finds a cultural and economic niche and showcases how contemporary 'narrowcasting,' which assumes social heterogeneity from the start and thus addresses certain groups of viewers rather than large masses, can become a transnational phenomenon. In this context, there are also two ways of reading ZDF's decision to show *30 Rock* on its digital outlet ZDF Neo. On the one hand, it discloses the quantitative limitations of *30 Rock's* transnational cultural work: with its many specific references to U.S. cultural history, it might simply be too obscure for large parts of international audiences. Still, although *30 Rock* sometimes even stifles international reception,

it produces transnational effects on the level of aesthetic expression. In the case of ZDF Neo, it is a logical fit for a new, highly differentiated station and its young, urban viewers who have the financial and technological means to watch digital TV as well as the pop-cultural knowledge to 'get' the show.⁴ And while ZDF previously had considerable problems programming their expensive imports *The Sopranos* and *Veronica Mars*, it has now created a specialized, though heavily restricted outlet for series like *30 Rock* or *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-). In the context outlined here, this is less a signal of the diminished impact of U.S. television (which would be hardly feasible considering free TV-hits like *Two and a Half Men*, *House* or *CS*), but rather the expansion of Americanization beyond mainstream symbolism. In this sense, Fluck's decision to use this development as an example of the diminished impact of American television vis-a-vis self-Americanized regional television in Germany has to be augmented. The "too sophisticated, too irreverent, too self-ironic" ("California" 223) quality of many recent U.S. television series is at the center of yet another development of Americanization - the transnational rise of American cool capitalism / hip consumerism - which in turn is heavily indebted to the American cultural developments he outlines.

In the future, we need to either speak of Americanizations or to accept that Americanization is a multi-faceted, precarious process that needs to reverberate rather than appeal to the basest instincts. *30 Rock*, and its concomitant cultural politics, teach us two lessons: Old approaches to Americanization are as defunct as traditional, network-era oriented approaches to television that considered the medium as a whole. However, it also makes clear that it is problematic to romanticize its symbolically subversive aesthetics and rhetoric and mistake it for actual subversion of U.S. capitalism, while at the same time constructing a capitalism much different from the sinister all-encompassing force so popular with continental thinkers of the twentieth century. The same holds true for its transnational cultural work, which is not per se something desirable. Frank Kelleter has already reminded us of the illusion inherent in "the widespread belief that to speak transnationally,

4 The targeting of niche audience of course neatly ties in with consumer capitalism's turn away from the phase of mass culture, which is increasingly seen as an aberration rather than an overcome norm (Lotz 5-6; Frank 21-22).

or to evoke the transnational, automatically means to speak in a counter-hegemonic way” (“Transnationalism” 30).

A show like *30 Rock* makes it obvious that we need to find a cultural analysis that comes up with a third way of analyzing global consumer capitalism which mediates between the hope that audiences are critical subversives and the fear that they are passive ‘cultural dupes/ This would necessitate a reassessment of the relationship between capital and culture, a more thorough understanding of individualism, and continued research in cultural transfer. American Studies, with its rich history of analyzing processes of Americanization, might in fact be a good place to analyze these cultural dynamics. Through its interdisciplinary approach to culture that integrates the analysis of textuality, historical developments, cultural symbolism, and political economy, it may be the ideal field to come up with a multi-faceted analysis that does justice to the complicated aesthetics of a show like *30 Rock*.

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