

# Now! Everything! And Then What?

## Comments on the Rift between the many Cultures

### 1. Now

I was standing at Times Square in New York recently when I experienced one of those rare moments in which thoughts and impressions that had long been racing wildly and confusedly through my head and colliding with one another suddenly become orderly and present a clear picture. As recently as ten years ago, the intersection of Broadway and 7th Avenue, with all its bright lights and neon advertising, was considered a red light district full of grungy theaters until a get-tough city administration under Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani used hard-line policing and investment dollars to get rid of the sleaze. In its place, it staged at this highly symbolic venue on December 31, 1999 what may well have been the world's glitziest millennium New Year's Eve party. Today, Times Square is truly a widow offering a vision of the Culture of Tomorrow. On one corner, ABC-TV allows passers-by to press their noses right up against the plate glass of the network's studio while live shows are being broadcast. Meanwhile, high above them, a gigantic illuminated ticker presents a double text band of the latest news from the worlds of politics, business and sport. The pedestrians can simultaneously follow the TV show's progress on a giant Jumbotron screen overhead. Flickering on a similarly enormous screen just opposite it is the programming of a competing network, NBC. Current, real-time stock quotes from the tech-heavy NASDAQ exchange illuminate the space in between. High-rise billboards—their messages changing frequently—advertise the most important new films and the latest in popular ready-to-wear fashion. On the northern edge of Times Square stands the towering Bertelsmann building, the US headquarters of the global media conglomerate, head office of Random House, the world's largest mass-market publisher, and, in a recent development, now also the headquarters of the largest German publishing house—formerly known as Bertelsmann München, English is now the language of this media giant's corporate culture. Time Warner is just next-door. A little red street sign right in the middle of all this has an effect that is rather absurd but, at the same time, precise as a haiku; although, strictly speaking, it has only to do with traffic regulation, it could nevertheless serve as the all-encompassing maxim of the whole district and its bustling activities: "No standing anytime."

Everything is present at every moment. It is not temporal sequence, a proceeding in one-after-another fashion, that is determinative, but rather synchronicity. And each individual element is linked in real time—or almost real time—with other events that have direct consequences for all other events and images. Only, from a superficial perspective, there is no way to get an overview of these reciprocal interactions, to say nothing of being able to reconstruct them. In an admittedly somewhat exaggerated formulation, it would be conceivable that a person—an agent of synchronicity, as it were—could stand at Times Square and purchase large quantities of stock over his cell phone, an action which on one hand effects the quotes on the NASDAQ display as well as, on the other hand, triggering headlines on the news ticker and the giant TV screens, to which the agent in turn reacts. A TV crew might film him as he was going about this, which would in turn have various consequences: on the one hand, his actions would be made much clearer; on the other hand, the very story of the agent of Times Square would make the mechanics of this process

itself the focus of media attention, which would in turn effect stock prices, so that, in the end, contradictory impulses would be the result. The media's exposure of the manipulability of stock prices would depress those same values that the agent's purchases had been driving up just moments before. As everyone knows, this is by no means science fiction, but rather everyday reality and the way the culture of visual media and the Internet function today. This, however, constitutes a stark contrast to a cultural tradition of linear narratives, of books that are constructed of stories with a beginning and an end, with a rhythm consisting of accents and pauses, of a self-contained form enclosed between a front and back cover, or between exposition and coda. The element of simultaneity triggers a collision with narratives featuring a clear developmental arc, a sequence based upon lead-in, mounting tension, climax and resolution, and hardly anything about this fundamental dramaturgy has changed since its basic forms were developed in the earliest epics three or four thousand years ago. In turn, the cultural identities to which these basic dramatic forms give expression likewise define themselves, almost like books, by means of delimitations and mutual relationships: between beginning and end, I am myself, in that I differentiate between myself and all others, and that I nevertheless interact with these others in accordance with rules defined as clearly as possible. To put it roughly and briefly, all of these are tasks accomplished by culture. What happens, though, if these sequences, if beginning and end, if the demarcations no longer exist? What kind of culture is that? And what sort of art can assume what sort of place in this culture?

## 2. Everything

When Gutenberg invented printing with movable type, men of learning made their way to the printers who published their works and they transacted business. This craft became increasingly multi-faceted and complex over time, but what remained essentially intact was the system that interposed between writer and reader a chain of mediators who, on one hand, help to optimize and professionalize content as well as design, and, on the other hand, perform the function of a collectively administered filter system that provides for quality and gives orientation to the reader who has only a limited amount of purchasing power, time and attention at his disposal. Secondly, it was long characteristic of the various institutions set up to propagate cultural—artistic as well as scientific—products that each category—music, literature, visual arts, performing arts—cultivated its own tradition and thus its own authoritative bodies responsible for this propagation in accordance with its respective tradition and identity. This has now changed. Over the last 10 years or so, a period which was in turn preceded by a preparatory phase of yet another decade, we have witnessed the establishment of conglomerates offering everything and doing so worldwide. The technological prerequisite for this is, as we all know, the digitization of the instruments of communication and, later, of content as well. Digital communications equipment made the exchange of information about works and products more efficient and integrated highly diverse cycles of commerce that had previously been largely isolated from one another according to discrete cultural categories. First came detailed and comprehensive information on financial affairs and politics; then, other content was added, and suddenly information on purchasing CDs and books was universally available on a 24/7 basis. Ordering procedures were simplified. Price margins became more uniform. Meanwhile, the products themselves are being digitized—text, graphics, motion pictures or audio, it makes no difference—and can be disseminated accordingly. Thomas Middelhof, during his tenure as head of Bertelsmann a few years ago, formulated his utopia in these terms: “A positive example: our music company BMG stages the opera ‘Turandot’ in the Forbidden City in Peking. A CD is made of this performance, our TV subsidiary CLT-Ufa produces a film,

our 'Stern' magazine publishes an article about it. And now we can even market the CD through our clubs and on the Internet." One thing above all is interesting about this picture: never before, presumably, has a fantasy of feasibility and omnipotence been laid out so pragmatically. Inherent in the unconditional belief in the industrializability of culture is the reflection of the extent to which even the newest and largest of these culture conglomerates have preserved the old world of cultural handicrafts, the ways in which wordsmiths and the carpenters of musical notes have gone about their work. One is not so much struck by the novel aspect of these sentences as by their ancient tradition that had applied until just a short time ago before the beginning of the cultures of synchronicity and open forms. The second remarkable aspect about these conglomerates is how comparatively small the market for all these cultural products is once it is viewed in the context of other markets. AOL Time Warner, the world's largest media enterprise, is big: its 1999 annual revenues of \$34.2 billion are somewhat larger than the whole \$26.1 billion US book market. The media market as a whole, and the book market in particular, is, however—in light of the public attention focused on it—astoundingly small. The combined revenues of the world's 20 largest book markets—from the US to Argentina—approximately equal the annual revenues of the electrical giant Siemens (approximately \$74 billion). The list of the world's 20 largest book markets include tiny nations like Austria, Belgium and Switzerland, which makes it clear to what a small extent these cultural markets are representative of cultural expression in this world. Or, to provide a quantitative perspective on the state of affairs just alluded to: the source language of about 50% of the world's published translations is English. On the other hand, only 6% of all translations are into English from all other languages combined. Everything! And now, immediately! That is a meager selection, and a peculiarly limited program.

### 3. And then what?

It is remarkable that the culture of globalization has obviously succeeded in evoking scant confidence, as reflected in the mediocre performance of the shares of most media conglomerates and "content providers" even during the boom year of 1999–2000. Experiences reported by countless managers in cultural industries point in the same direction; a collection of such accounts provides thoroughly convincing documentation of the limited extent to which artistic success can be planned and of the many failures chalked up by even experienced financial managers in these industries.

Furthermore, even beyond such ambivalent assessments, the shaky foundation of the culture industry has an even more fundamental dimension: these industrial conglomerates are by and large not much more than marketing channels, though indeed ones with the potential to structurally merge previously separate components. Formidable works originate as a rule outside of this system, stellar careers begin (and often end) likewise somewhere outside in the jungle of the wide-open world and not in the conglomerate's own laboratory. That the integrative power and the sheer market muscle of these distribution channels will, however, also soon attempt to exert a lasting influence on the production of creative works—that is, on art itself—is an obvious assumption.

It is also evident that the two systems are on a collision course that might produce a brutal impact. It is with great suspense that we await the answer to the question of what will happen if audiences—viewers, listeners, and readers; that is, the users—no longer just passively follow the action from the sidelines, but instead get into the game. And perhaps this is the truly innovative step, the preparatory phase leading up to which we are observing right now: that it is no longer the creator, and also no longer the medium, that it is not the genius or the star, not Hollywood or the New York Times that are essential



and decisive, since they have long since become too expensive, been proceeding along courses that are too contradictory, and don't have all the answers, but rather myriads of fickle amateurs who increasingly unpredictably decide in favor of whatever pleases them at the moment; if, at last, identities—the movements among the many atoms demarcated from each other—nevertheless remain more powerful than the mighty arrangers of an efficient world. To put it another way, what if the stock market of the past year suddenly becomes the turbulent model for the global cultural landscapes! Now. Everything. Or maybe not.