Fabricating the Absolute Fake - revised edition

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During the fall semester of 2003, as a visiting professor from the Netherlands, I taught the graduate research seminar *America in Media Abroad* at the Cinema Studies Department of New York University. The required reading included Jean Baudrillard’s *America*. Even though they recognized the usefulness of hyperreality as a theoretical approach to American culture, my American students were rightfully upset by Baudrillard’s claim that only Europeans could fully understand America. “It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum,” Baudrillard writes. “The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model.”

Although outrageously arrogant and Eurocentric, Baudrillard’s claim is reminiscent of the oft-made suggestion that “the one most valuable contribution European scholars can make to American Studies in general is the very distance from which they view America when they deal with it in their research and teaching.” Accordingly, the position of American Studies scholars outside of the United States can provide alternative points of view to the more inward-looking perspectives of their American colleagues. The literal distance, geographically as well as culturally, can serve as a critical distance, providing the outside scholar with an encompassing overview less visible to the scholar on the inside. “Whereas Americans seem lost among the many trees of their cultural multiplicity, we cannot help but see the forest of their American identity,” as Heinz Ickstadt has stated quite poetically.

Compelling as it may sound, and in particular to European scholars in American Studies, this assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, such a self-declared outside position tends to reinforce conventional distinctions between Europe and America (in which Europe embodies high culture and
history, while America embodies pop culture and modern commercialism),
even if the outside is not explicitly defined as European. Second, this assump-
tion underestimates the global dominance of American culture, thereby igno-
ring that international American Studies scholars are never fully “outside” of its
omnipresence. If “America” can be perceived as a simulacrum, as Baudrillard
has suggested, then those outside of the United States are implicated as well
(including Baudrillard himself), as “America” reaches beyond the geographical
boundaries of the American nation-state, also including an America constitu-
ed by the images and signs that are globally mediated by Hollywood, television,
pop music, and advertising.

The position of being both outside and inside American pop culture has
been the starting point of all the courses that I teach on this topic, as well as the
premise of Fabricating the Absolute Fake. Since 2001, I have been teaching the
graduate seminars America in Global Media Culture and Images of America at
the Media Studies Department of the University of Amsterdam. I have taught
similar seminars at the Cinema Studies Department of New York University
(2003), the American Studies Department of the University of Amsterdam
(2006), and the Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature Department of
the University of Minnesota (2009). Important aims of these seminars are
making students aware of the omnipresence of American pop culture in their
own daily lives and giving them tools to analyze this presence, both in rela-
tion to the United States as well as to their own national or local background.
Such an approach takes “America” rather than the USA as its object of study,
focusing not so much on the diversity of cultures within the United States, but
rather on “America” as represented and appropriated in global media culture.

The Americanness of American Pop Culture

Since the introduction of American Studies as a separate recognized academic
discipline in the Netherlands in 1947, scholars have been debating whether
American Studies should focus on the interaction between the two cultures
(e.g. the history of Dutch immigration to the United States, the diplomatic
relationship between the two nation-states, the Americanization of Dutch so-
ciety), thus taking advantage of a specific Dutch position, or whether Dutch
scholars should participate in the more “general” study of the United States, re-
gardless of their national background. Although treating the national subject
position of the scholar differently, both perspectives in the debate maintain the
outside-inside dichotomy, as they differ merely in the way the outside position
should be applied. From both perspectives in American Studies, the Ameri-
canness of American culture tends to be overemphasized, often perceived as a form of exceptionalism, placed in juxtaposition either to the explicit national subject position of the scholar or to a more “general” outside position.

However, beyond the American Studies programs, American pop culture tends to be approached quite differently, as there its Americananness is often rendered invisible. For example, I teach most of my courses on this topic at the Media Studies Department (formerly Film and Television Studies) which was founded in 1991 and currently is one of the largest departments of the University of Amsterdam’s Faculty of Humanities. Although American culture is prominently present in the department’s curriculum – both in terms of the objects studied (e.g. Hollywood film, American television series) and the academic literature used – this American presence is hardly ever made explicit. We often take the Americanness of Hollywood and other forms of American pop culture for granted, even when its American character is quite prominent. In a sense, then, the global dominance of American pop culture, including its capacity to present itself as “universal,” extends into academia. As also quoted in chapter one, Thomas Elsaesser has referred to Hollywood as “an engine of global hegemony,” exactly because of its claim of universalism:

Declaring this “national” agenda as universal – democracy, freedom, open exchange of people, goods, and services – has served America well, insofar as these values and goals (“the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness”) have … been widely endorsed and aspired to by peoples who neither share territorial proximity with the United States nor language, faith, customs, or a common history.5

The question whether Hollywood should be considered an American (read “national”) cinema or instead a global one has been debated quite extensively in both American Studies and Media Studies.6 One main argument is that, because most of its consumers are actually non-American (and therefore have become more important to the industry than the “domestic” market), Hollywood should be considered global. Specifically referring to the above quote by Elsaesser, Melis Behlil states that Hollywood does not promote “a ‘national’ agenda, but in fact a corporate one,” arguing that “globalization is criticized foremost for allowing corporate interests to take precedence over all else, and Hollywood in its blockbuster era is the manifestation of this corporate capitalist system.”7 Indeed, Hollywood’s dominant role in global media culture cannot be denied. However, instead of asking whether Hollywood is American or global, the relevant point is that this global corporate capitalist system has been shaped largely by American values, which is possible because they are not con-
ceived as “national” but rather as “universal.” By ignoring the Americanness of Hollywood – and of American pop culture in general – one too easily accepts its claim of universalism, resulting in, to quote Stuart Hall again, “essentially an American conception of the world.”

The seemingly contradictory task of a scholar and teacher in American Studies and Media Studies is to deemphasize, and yet simultaneously recognize, the Americanness of American culture to counter its claims of both exceptionalism and universalism. Without suggesting that the study of American culture should be limited to the study of pop culture alone (which would reinforce rather than challenge the highbrow vs. lowbrow divide of the Europe-America dichotomy), the entrance point is American pop culture, as it is the global mediation of Hollywood, television, pop music, and advertisements that shapes the global omnipresence of American culture. Such a focus on American pop culture and its possible meanings has been perceived by some scholars in the Netherlands (as well as elsewhere) as part of a postmodern “cultural turn,” described as “a frivolous shift in emphasis towards the study of ‘meaning,’” in which “reality is no longer of any interest to those who believe that we cannot identify what is real, caught up as we are in perceptions and social constructs.” I argue, however, that the “reality” of the USA as a nation-state and its social-political role in the world can only be fully understood when “America” (be it defined as imagined, mythic, or hyperreal) is included within American Studies. Others have wondered “to what extent the typical form and content of such media and culture courses prevent students from obtaining good insights into American culture on its ‘native’ ground, past and present.” This would, erroneously, suggest that courses focusing on the global omnipresence of American pop culture automatically replace other courses on American culture and politics. Most importantly, teaching these seminars is to help students recognize the American character of American pop culture, not so much to prove its Americanness (let alone its exceptionalism), but instead to challenge its “universal” supposition.

The American I Never Was

Taking a globally mediated “America” as the main object of study has its pitfalls, as it is open to a wide range of subjective interpretations which differ from place to place and over time. Rather than making overarching claims about what “America” means to anyone around the world, one can investigate significant ways in which it has been represented in pop culture, and also how these representations are globally re-imagined and appropriated. To do so, one
must recognize the ambiguity that is inherent to a subject position of being both within and outside of American pop culture. In my seminars, I use the concept of “the American I never was,” borrowed from a multimedia project by the Dutch artist Chris Keulemans, which, as discussed in chapter four, encompasses the ambiguous position of growing up in a culture in which American pop culture is omnipresent, without being geographically located within the United States. As a theoretical concept, “the American I never was” effectively captures such a slippery identity, making the double position of being both outsider and insider explicit. The concept opens up ways to investigate the omnipresence of American pop culture, thereby recognizing that “we” are all implicated in one manner or another, yet without reducing this experience to a singular “universal” one.

As their first assignment, the students are asked to write a short autobiographical essay about the American they never were. In this way, they are immediately made aware of their own ambiguous subject position, which they also have to articulate themselves. The results tend to differ greatly. Some students focus primarily on the dominant position of American pop culture in their daily practices, as they describe the many American products they consume, including going to Hollywood movies (which constitutes roughly 85 percent of all films shown in Dutch cinemas), eating at McDonald’s and New York Pizza (which, quite tellingly, is a Dutch company), watching American television series such as *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003-2010), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-present), and *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-present), and listening to American pop stars and hip-hop artists such as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, 50 Cent, and Kanye West. Often these students remark that they did not realize they used so many American products until they had to do the assignment, which many of them see as a negative realization. As such, these essays fit within the perspective of Americanization as a form of cultural imperialism, perceiving non-American consumers as passive victims of a globally mediated American mass culture that threatens local and national cultures.

Other students, on the contrary, focus primarily on the positive influence that American pop culture has on their lives. Many recount how they have been inspired by particular Hollywood movies and American television series, how they are fans of American pop stars, music genres, and sports, or how they identify themselves with American hip-hop culture in the way they dress and talk. Some have spent a year at an American high school or college as an exchange student, an experience which makes them feel more “American,” even when the “real” America turned out to be quite different than anticipated. Particularly hip-hop fans associate America with notions of “freedom” and “rebellion,” quite similar to the way American rock ’n’ roll served as a youth
counterculture for earlier generations. Contrary to the other essays, these essays fit within the perspective of Americanization as a form of active cultural appropriation, in which non-Americans can be seen as active consumers who translate American pop culture and its connotations within their own local context.

The subsequent classroom discussion of the assignment always leads to heated debates about what is and what is not American, and about whether we are being taken over by American pop culture or actively are making it our own. Often the discussion evolves into the question of pop culture itself. Does the culture industry keep us passively and uncritically entertained, or can pop culture function as a potential source of personal, social, and political empowerment? The main goal of the assignment is not to provide clear-cut answers but to render such contradictions visible. Americanization can be both a form of cultural imperialism and a practice of active cultural appropriation. Recognizing these two forces of American pop culture rather than favoring one over the other is necessary to understand the complexities of Americanization and to create a foundation for a critical analysis of actual cultural objects. In the follow-up assignment, the students are asked to write a short essay (using the assigned academic literature) in which they present two sets of arguments, respectively agreeing and opposing the thesis that Americanization equals globalization, thereby inviting them to locate their own subject position within a broader theoretical framework.

In her review of Fabricating the Absolute Fake, the Belgian scholar Sofie Van Bauwel argues that I tend to equate a Dutch experience of Americanization to a continental European one, thereby “seemingly forgetting that the Netherlands occupies a specific position in relation to American culture, which differs from other European countries.” True enough, all countries, including the Netherlands, have their own particular (perhaps even unique) relationship with American culture. Using the concept of “the American I never was” inherently means taking one’s own subject position as starting point, which, in my case, is based on being a Dutchman, having grown up in a country where American pop culture is omnipresent. As Neil Campbell, Jude Davies, and George McKay rightfully warn in the introduction to Issues in Americanization and Culture, one has to be careful about making claims that suggest that a singular (national) experience of Americanization can represent others. Nevertheless, instead of emphasizing the differences in experience, be it national or other differences, the focus can also be on the similarities. Although most of my students have been Dutch, my courses have also included international students coming from various countries ranging from Australia, Germany, India, Italy, and Sweden to Bulgaria, China, Russia, the United States, and
Yemen. All these students have presented case studies of absolute fakes, based on their own specific subject positions as Americans they never were (including the American students, thereby challenged to rethink their national identity). These international case studies often included specific local or national twists, showing that Americanization indeed can differ from place to place and over time. However, they also show that American pop culture can function as a shared language, with the potential of connecting different cultural identities beyond (or in spite of) national boundaries. What I have tried to do with both Fabricating the Absolute Fake and the courses I teach is to find productive ways of analyzing the global omnipresence of American pop culture without reconstructing strict national boundaries, yet also without making universalist claims.

**Anti-Americans We Never Were**

The focus on American pop culture also brings another ambiguity to the foreground, namely the contradiction that can exist between a personal investment in American pop culture and a critical stance towards the politics of the American nation-state. Such an ambiguity is already shown by the annual course evaluations, which always include a couple of complaints that the seminar is either too pro-American or too anti-American. In classroom discussions, students debate how their pleasure in American pop culture is (or is not) affected by their criticism of American politics, such as the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Guantánamo Bay, and the Abu Ghraib scandal. Even after the election of President Barack Obama, who tends to be very popular among the students, many remained critical of the USA, particularly because of the continuing war in Afghanistan and the use of unmanned drones in bomb attacks. A historical comparison can be made to the anti-Vietnam War movement in the Netherlands during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Dutch war protesters were heavily influenced by the American counterculture in the way they expressed their protest. A critical stance toward the nation-state USA does not automatically result in a rejection of American pop culture.

The relationship of pop culture and international politics was also the topic of the 2002 internet discussion about the Hollywood movie *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), which generally is perceived as a criticism of the American involvement in the 1991 Gulf War. The project consisted of several students of my America in Global Media Culture seminar joining a two-week online discussion about *Three Kings* with students from Howard University in Washington, D.C. and King Alfred’s College (now the University of Winches-
ter) in the United Kingdom (a full evaluation of the project has been published in the *Journal of Studies in International Education*). Much against our expectations as instructors, the American students were as critical of the movie, as well as of the American involvement in Iraq, as were the Dutch and British students. The division between American and non-American students that we had anticipated did not occur. Instead, as we reported, “seeing Americans debate between themselves enabled the Europeans to see U.S. culture as itself fragmented and pluralized … [while] the inclusion of international students helped American students broaden their perspective on the way American popular culture plays a dominant role in the so-called global culture.”

Moreover, the project showed how students from different (western) countries can discuss issues of global politics with a Hollywood movie as a shared main reference.

The most obvious topic of discussion is 9/11, as, immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the transatlantic solidarity of “we are all Americans” (the famous *Le Monde* quote) was challenged by the “either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” doctrine of the Bush administration. In his article about the student workshops on 9/11 that he taught at several American Studies programs in the United Kingdom, Alasdair Spark poses the question: “So, are we all American now, as some claimed in the aftermath?” As he describes, on the one hand, his British students, “consumers of America since birth,” could easily relate to the event, because of their cultural closeness to American culture—“9/11 struck home, much more so than events with a far greater death toll elsewhere have done, or could do”—yet, on the other hand, they could not relate at all to both the war effort of the Bush administration and the patriotism of media events such as the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telethon.

A more problematic position is presented in *Stof en as* (“dust and ashes”), the first and only Dutch academic essay collection on 9/11. As editors Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik explain in the introduction, they perceive 9/11 as a form of trauma that needs a process of collective healing, for Americans as well as Europeans: “Even though it happened at the other side of the ocean, 9/11 was also for us in Europe a traumatic event.” From such a perspective, “we” in Europe are indeed “Americans,” becoming part of a therapeutic reshaping of “our” collective cultural identity through American culture (with the exception of one essay on French literature, all the case studies discussed in the collection are American). Thus, in this view, even if the notion that “we are all Americans” no longer holds up when transatlantic solidarity is challenged by the political actions of the nation-state USA, culturally “America” continues to shape “our” collective identity.

Here the concept of “the American I never was” proves to be helpful again, as, unlike the collective cultural identity suggested above, the concept
leaves much more room for ambiguity and contradiction, enabling a perspective that not merely sees 9/11 as a trauma that needs individual or collective healing, but also as an act of international warfare that warrants a rethinking of global politics. Such complexity also becomes apparent in the short essays that the students write on 9/11. Some of the essays focus on what students perceive as specific (or even “exceptional”) American responses, such as the overtly American patriotism in pop music and television programs or the hero worship of New York firefighters and policemen, whereas others discuss 9/11 within a less explicitly American context, addressing instead how 9/11 has challenged postmodern notions of “reality” or the representability of disaster. Moreover, work by students has shown that also in the United States the Bush doctrine of “us” versus “them” has been questioned. For example, one of my students, a white Finnish exchange student living in the USA, clearly identified herself with the African-American rapper KRS-One, who made the controversial claim that “9/11 happened to them, not us.” From KRS-One’s perspective, “them” are the representatives of white corporate America, whereas “us” are the (predominantly non-white) underprivileged Americans. That a white Finnish exchange student identifies herself quite easily with the latter instead of the former reveals both the power and the ambiguity of the “American I never was” concept. As a Finnish hip-hop fan, she is indeed an American she never was, yet one who culturally feels more connected to the “us” as articulated by an African-American rapper than by the “us” of the dominant discourse of post-9/11 American patriotism.

**The Absolute Fake as Object of Analysis**

Once the students have articulated their own subject positions, how should the omnipresent “America” be approached? How does one analyze a pop culture that is globally mediated and which cannot be reduced to a singular interpretation? For their first object-based assignment, I give the students two options: 1) choose a specific American pop-cultural object – Hollywood movie, television series, pop star, etc. – as a starting point to investigate how the object fits within the discourses of Americanization and globalization; 2) make a photographic essay or short film about the images of America that you encounter in your everyday life. The students are asked to identify both explicit and implicit references to the nation-state USA or an ideal America and to recognize ideological narratives such as the American Dream. Moreover, I emphasize that no object stands on its own, but is always intertextually related to other objects and open to different interpretations and cultural appropriations, yet also
positioned within specific historical and political contexts. For the students, these close readings of actual pop-cultural objects provide an opening for analysis, enabling them to make concrete observations about how “America” is imagined and represented in globally mediated pop culture.

Not surprisingly, students tend to choose rather obvious objects, ranging from the popular American movies, television series, and pop stars of the moment to American sports (baseball, basketball, wrestling) and food companies (Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Starbucks). Those who pick the second option tend to focus on advertisements and logos of American brands visible in the cityscape. One student documented the Americanization of her hometown Utrecht by combining photographs taken from the city’s archive with current pictures of the same places, showing how local stores have been replaced by corporate American ones. Another took pictures of each American flag he came across while walking through the streets of Amsterdam, resulting in an eclectic collection of people wearing stars-and-stripes sweaters, American flags on tourist restaurant menus and canal boat schedules, and stars-and-stripes cushions in the shop window of a fancy home decorations store.

Such an emphasis on analyzing the object can be criticized, quite understandably, for overlooking the reception of pop culture. For example, in his review of *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, Laurence Raw writes that “some evidence of how viewers react to shows like *Oprah* – in the form of surveys, ethnographic studies, or blogs – might have given a sense of how (or even whether) dominant images of American culture as disseminated through the media affect individual consumers.”¹⁶ Reception studies and audience research are without a doubt of great importance when studying the global mediation of American pop culture. “The value of popular culture, whatever its textual qualities, is in what audiences do with it,” writes Joke Hermes, persuasively showing the scholarly need for “tracing how audiences take up their roles as cultural citizens by enjoying and making use of popular culture – or, of course, by denouncing, hating, and vilifying it.”¹⁷ The aim of both *Fabricating the Absolute Fake* and the seminars I teach, however, is to recognize the ideological content of pop-cultural objects, such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, not because they contain hidden messages that need to be revealed, but because we tend to take their ideological content for granted, even if it is right there in our face. Whether or not all the viewers of *Oprah!* – in the USA as well as the 150 other countries across the globe where the show is broadcast – actually believe or agree that America is the Beacon of Freedom and Opportunity, the way the show presents this image of America as a self-evident and uncontested fact remains relevant, particularly because that message is reinforced incessantly by many other American pop-cultural objects. This does not mean, however,
that “America” is an unequivocal sign, that its meanings cannot change or be disputed. For example, while one student examined explicitly American images present at a local McDonald’s restaurant, another student interviewed its young customers and found out they did not perceive McDonald’s as American at all, but rather as “my favorite after-school hangout” or “the place where my sister works.”

For their second and final object-based assignment, the students write an extensive research paper based on one case study, this time an “American” pop-cultural object produced outside of the USA. Here Umberto Eco’s concept of the absolute fake turns out to be most productive. By viewing the object as a copy of an American original, one can explore how “America” has been appropriated and translated into a local or national setting. Over the years, my students have analyzed many pop-cultural objects, most often movies, remakes of American sitcoms, hip-hop artists, and music videos. One student wrote about American football in the Netherlands, reconstructing the fascinating history of how the Amsterdam Admirals team, including cheerleaders, exactly copied the American original when they started participating in the NFL Europe. A case study of the earlier-mentioned New York Pizza, a Dutch fast food chain founded in 1993, focused on how the company literally promotes itself as “the original,” yet on its website is very explicit and seemingly proud of its Dutch origin. An analysis of Dutch entertainment show news television programs revealed how the imitation of the American original – its conventions, its content, and its mode of production – did introduce an American conception of celebrity stardom into Dutch culture, yet simultaneously provided space for the creation of national celebrities, with their own locally-based characteristics. Together, the case studies present concrete examples of the often seemingly contradictory ways in which American pop culture is dominantly present as well as actively appropriated within a local or national culture. Analyzed as absolute fakes, the objects of these case studies refute the narrow arguments that American pop culture either endangers local and national cultures by replacing them or instead has become a “universal” global culture that can freely be appropriated. Through both their particularities and some shared characteristics, they reveal the cultural dynamics of Americanization without falling back on one all-explanatory model.

Conclusion: Yes We Can, Too!

On the evening of November 4, 2008, the day of the American presidential elections, several major sold-out events had been organized in Amsterdam. Al-
though always a very popular happening in the Netherlands, the 2008 Ameri-
can presidential elections were particularly exciting, because the first African-
American president ever was about to be elected. As an American Studies
scholar, I participated in three of these events, including a panel discussion
on Barack Obama and the spectacle of politics. According to one of the panel
members, a cognitive psychologist, the Obama phenomenon could never hap-
pen in the Netherlands, as, unlike Americans, we are not susceptible to such a
political spectacle. “Dutch people are too down-to-earth to be persuaded by
such emotional tactics,” she said. “Oh really,” I responded, and I pointed at the
room filled with Dutch students wearing Obama T-shirts, cheering hysterically
each time Obama’s face appeared on one of the many television screens around
the room, while the Barock Obamas, an Amsterdam college band formed spe-
cifically for this historic occasion, were playing American “Barock ‘n’ roll” mu-
sic in the background. “Oh really! Are you sure that we are not susceptible to
any of this?”

My question was obviously meant to be rhetorical. Not only my students,
but all of us are just as susceptible as Americans are when it comes to pop cul-
ture and the spectacle of politics. Instead of claiming an advantage by being
an outsider with an overarching perspective on the United States of America,
international scholars and teachers of American Studies should recognize that
we too are implicated by American pop culture. This is not to say that a per-
spective from outside the USA cannot provide a relevant alternative point of
view; American Studies undoubtedly benefits from the wide range of differ-
ent perspectives coming from around the world. The added value, however,
lies not in a geographical or cultural distance which automatically translates
into a critical distance, but rather in the ambiguity of our subject positions as
Americans we never were, both outsider and insider, continuously appropriat-
ing “America” within our own lives.