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Intercultural Dossier

Experiencing American Culture in the Digital Age

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Table of Contents

- 1. Introduction 1
 - 1.1 Intercultural Studies..... 1
 - 1.2 Academics..... 1
 - 1.3 Expectations.....2
 - 1.4 Culture as a Concept.....3
- 2. Main Part 3
 - 2.1 Does American Friendliness Exist?4
 - 2.2 Visiting a Concert6
 - 2.3 Experiencing Everyday Culture Through Media.....8
 - 2.4 American News Coverage9
 - 2.5 Political Town Halls in the United States11
- 3. Conclusion..... 12
- Works Cited..... 14
- Plagiarism Statement..... 15

Experiencing American Culture in the Digital Age

1. Introduction

1.1 Intercultural Studies

When starting my intercultural studies, I asked myself in what ways I could try to advance my cultural understanding of American culture without actually leaving Germany. Thankfully nowadays it does not seem to be as difficult to incorporate intercultural situations into one's own daily life as it might have been a few decades ago. Through the internet and digital media in general, access to English speaking media has become just as easy as access to German speaking media. Doing that in general was not something new to me. In some ways, I had been doing that since my later years in school.

At the start of the decade, when I was still in school, I had actively made the decision to improve my English skills and thus started to implement the language into my daily life. That mainly meant that I switched my entertainment consumption almost completely from German to English. I started to watch television in English, I started reading books in English, and I started to play video games in English.

What had been of course quite unusual and challenging for me at first, quickly started to become easier and easier. Once the initial irritation of doing that had worn off, it became the new normal for me. I was surprised at how comfortable I would get with listening to and comprehending English. And while my plan originally was to “just get a little better“ to improve my exam results, I never stopped and my English skills improved continually. In the end, I fell in love with the language and even decided to become an English teacher – an ironic development considering English had been one of my struggles during my earlier years in school.

1.2 Academics

The concept of intercultural studies fits generally well in my daily life and my academic studies. Even in my other subject, History, I put a focus on American history. As part of the Culture and Communication at home module, I did attend two classes. I mainly chose those classes based on what I thought would be most beneficial to my personal academics. One was a lecture on different aspects of English language teaching and second language acquisition, which I considered to be useful for my role as a future teacher. As I normally gravitate towards Literary Studies, it was a welcome opportunity for me to dive a little deeper into the principles of teaching. In that lecture, we also dealt with topics like

Intercultural Communicative Competence and Transcultural Communicative Competence which was a convenient connection to my intercultural studies.

The other class that I attended was a seminar on Postcolonial Shakespeare. It was a smaller seminar style class that relied a lot more on the exchange between the lecturer and the participating students. In that class, we read two plays by William Shakespeare. Those plays were *The Tempest* and *Othello*. The class schedule was basically divided into two parts, each part focusing on one of the plays. We then applied different themes and different approaches in reading those plays, for example feminist readings. Those themes were discussed in presentations that the students had to prepare.

1.3 Expectations

When it comes to my expectations, I initially had mixed feelings about this Intercultural Dossier. For one, I considered myself to be already quite engaged in American culture and in some ways on a permanent study of that. Due to my interests in US politics, I have been fairly immersed in the American news discourse – which I will deal with in one of the following chapters – for the past few years. The 2016 presidential election had been the starting point for that interest as I was stunned by the – from my perspective – very unexpected election result which had ignited my interest for US politics.

But mostly I was unsure, in how far I could really advance my understanding of American culture without actually leaving Germany. Because I do think that going to the target country and immersing yourself into that cultural space is by far the most efficient and effective way to get an understanding of another culture.

Still, what I did look forward to in conducting my intercultural studies and writing this Intercultural Dossier was the opportunity to analyze and reflect on some cultural issues in depth and also the opportunity to do so in an academic framework. Diving a little deeper into culture as a concept in a more general sense first and to then taking a really closer look at some aspects of the American culture.

As one of the focuses of this paper will be on American media, especially news coverage in the media, I was very interested to examine in what ways American news coverage on television differs from German news coverage. I wanted to know if the formats were different and if even the basic approaches would be different.

1.4 Culture as a Concept

There are of course different ways one can try to come closer to an understanding of what culture actually means. One of those approaches would be to look at it from a simple etymological point of view. The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term culture as “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time“.

Culture is of course also a term of several dimensions and even though we sometimes seem to use the terms nations and cultures synonymously, the term culture goes way beyond nations and languages. In one of the later chapters, I will reflect on a concert by an African American artist that I visited in October, and that there were references made to African American culture throughout the songs and visuals of that concert. So the culture of a country does consist of several different subcultures and each community has their own cultural uniqueness.

There has also always been some level of discomfort for me when talking about culture. For me, culture inherently contains some sort of generalization of people. I find it difficult to find a balance between the cultural distinctions of different countries and communities – something that undoubtedly exists – and the individuality of every single person. I also feel that diving into another culture, reflecting about it and also analyzing it requires a lot of sensibility. That is particularly the case if the person reflecting it is not part of that specific cultural group they are analyzing.

2. Main Part

The categories laid out in the Guidelines will be covered in the following manner: Category A (Everyday Culture) will be discussed in chapter 2.1. Category B (High Culture) will be represented in chapter 2.2. The remaining three chapters will belong to Category C (Media) and will thus be the focus of this Intercultural Dossier.

That focus on media is partially the case because of the modern world we are living in and the opportunity that digital media is presenting to us in terms of intercultural studies. When trying to create intercultural awareness from the location of your home country, it seems to me that nowadays media presents the most diverse and most accessible way to engage with

the target culture without actually leaving your home country. I think that through media one can come close to an effective immersion into another culture.

2.1 Does American Friendliness Exist?

When I started to think about what I thought of American culture based on the things I already knew, I tried to think about my basic ideas of what I think of first when it comes to American people. One of the things that I have frequently experienced when talking to American people is their unusual warmth and friendliness – unusual in comparison to Germans. That is especially true when talking to strangers. Germans seem to be more distanced especially when they do not know a person.

To me that always becomes apparent when talking to one of my brother's best friends. He is an American by birth and holds a dual citizenship for both, the United States and Germany. In his adult life, he spent almost a decade living in Phoenix, Arizona and had also lived in Seattle. Whenever I see him interact with me or with other people, his openness towards everyone becomes striking to me. He stands just as an example for something that I have observed with many different American people.

When I visited New York City in 2014, I realized how difficult navigating in such a huge city is – especially as I had grown up in a city that has just about under 50,000 residents. I remember standing in a subway station with my sister and we did not have the slightest idea where we needed to go. And I remember two New Yorkers immediately asking if we needed any assistance, without us actively asking them for help.

When I was in eighth grade, we had an American Teaching Assistant in our class. Her name was Mary and she would be with our teacher during our English classes and support her throughout the lessons. Mary grew up in Wisconsin and was a German major at an American university. She stayed in Germany as part of her studies.

On her first day with us, I remember the teacher doing a Q&A session where we (the students) were able to ask Mary about everything that came to our mind. For most of us, this was our first encounter with an American person after all, so that session ended up taking the entire lesson because there was a genuine and deep interest among us students to hear her perspective.

One of those questions asked points in the very same direction of this chapter. I remember someone asking her about what she thought was the most striking difference between

Germans and Americans. And she answered with the exact thesis of this chapter, that Germans tend to be a little more cold than Americans. She said that when she asks an American stranger for help somewhere in the city, because she might have lost her orientation, they would be more engaging and more eager to help out than a German stranger.

When I chose the topic for this chapter, I asked myself why I also believed that to be the case. Is it because I had gained similar experiences over the years that confirmed her thesis? Or is it because Mary's words had made an impression on me so many years ago and I started to look out for exactly that? Maybe her words have led to me developing some sort of bias on that matter and my experiences ended up being a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because in the end, all of the anecdotes of this chapter had been just that: my anecdotes. Things that I had experienced in life, assumptions that I made about that culture or group of people that I do not have any factual proof of.

So I tried to research some other perspectives on that matter. I wanted to find out if what I had experienced myself is just an anecdotal truth, something that I feel is the case, but might not be reflected in real data on the matter. It is of course hard to find some sort of empirical evidence on such a cultural issue. What I did find, however, were other perspectives from columnists and writers who had conducted their examinations about this matter as well.

One of the articles I found on this was from a columnist from the New Yorker named Karan Mahajan. He has immigrated to the United States from India. The article is written about his experiences when it comes to the cultural differences between India and the United States in terms of small talk. In order to demonstrate his experiences, he takes the example of visiting a restaurant and he writes that he observed that one of his American friends always does very friendly small talk with the servers there: "Tom always asked servers how they were doing or complimented their shirts or cracked jokes about the menu" (Mahajan).

Mahajan states that having grown up in an Indian culture, he would be much more straightforward and not into small talk with the servers at all. He questions the intellectual honesty of the American way of doing small talk. "Did he really care what they were wearing? ... If you did this little number with everyone, was it genuine?" (Mahajan).

Mahajan's perspective is something that I can partially relate to. As much as I enjoy the friendliness and the warmth of American small talk, I also know that I myself am very different from that. Having grown up in a German culture, I usually tend to be more direct. I am shying away from using the word "more honest" because I do not want to assume that American friendliness is coming from a disingenuous place. But I think that the cliché of very direct Germans is something that suits my personality rather well.

Another perspective that I found on this topic was from a writer for the New York Times. Geoff Dyer has expressed his thoughts on this topic from a European perspective. He points out that American friendliness makes him feel more appreciated whenever he is visiting the United States.

"Like many Europeans, I always feel good about myself in America; I feel appreciated, liked. It took a while to realize that this had nothing to do with me. It was about the people who made me feel this way: it was about charm. Yes, this is the bright secret of life in the United States: Americans are not just friendly and polite – they are also charming." (Dyer)

2.2 Visiting a Concert

When thinking about how to create an intercultural awareness in terms of so called high culture, I was thinking what event could do that and would be available to me in Germany. That is why I figured that a concert by an American artist would be one way to do that. That was one of the reasons – besides a personal affiliation to the respective artist – why in early October, I visited a concert by the American singer and songwriter Khalid. The concert was set in the König-Pilsener-Arena in Oberhausen. That venue can hold about 11,000 people. The arena was sold out, there seemed to be very high demand to see his concert. For this Intercultural Dossier, I tried to specifically look for cultural references that the artist or the overall presentation of the concert would make.

Khalid, whose full name is Khalid Donnell Robinson, was born in the United States and has spent most of his teenage years in the city of El Paso, Texas. The artist himself is African American and he at times referenced African American culture throughout the concert. I

felt like this part is particularly interesting in terms of an intercultural experience when going to such a concert.

It first shows that culture goes way beyond nationality and that there are subcultures everywhere, in many diverse communities. It is merely impossible to define “the American culture“ without acknowledging that it consists of several different subcultures. When we do think of something like “American culture“ we have to ask ourselves what it really is we are thinking about. And chances are high, that we would mostly refer to the cultural aspects regarding white people. Secondly – and that might be especially due to my background as a Historian with an affiliation for US history – it keeps the struggles of the African American community in the United States before one’s eyes.

Khalid also made several mentions about his hometown El Paso, Texas (which became a prominent news topic recently due to a mass shooting that happened in that city). One of his songs, called 9.13, contains the following lyrics:

The people of El Paso, Texas proudly present
The key to the city to Khalid Donnel Robinson
Forever, from the city of the 915 (Khalid)

This particular line introduced something to me that I had not been aware of before. That song is referencing a ceremony on September 13, 2018 when Khalid (whose full name is indeed Khalid Donnel Robinson) was presented with “the key to the city“ by the city’s mayor Dee Margo (Mekelburg). The “key to the city“ is a cultural tradition in the cities of the United States. It is awarded by the cities’ politicians to prominent residents or visitors of those cities. There is actually a German equivalent to that honor. In Germany, people can be awarded to be an Ehrenbürger.

During the concert, the artist also mentioned the creation of his own foundation that is focusing on education and music in local communities. It is called The Great Khalid Foundation. One quote on the “About Us“ page on their website summarizes the purpose of the foundation as the following: “I created a foundation that supports music & schools in underserved communities. It starts in El Paso and my goal is to provide resources and help bridge education and prominent music programs in the city“ (Robinson).

In the end, I thought it was interesting to attend a concert with a totally different incentive than I would usually have. Normally I would be focused simply on the music and the stage production, and I was surprised at how many instances of cultural aspects I could find in that concert after really looking for it.

2.3 Experiencing Everyday Culture Through Media

Access to English speaking media has become rather easy in the modern age. The internet allows someone in Germany to immerse themselves quite intensely into English speaking media – or many other languages for that matter. Ever since the emergence of streaming services like Netflix that offer to switch languages on a default basis, it is not a complicated issue anymore to consume English speaking media in their original language. As a huge part of the material that is available on services like Netflix is produced in the United States, it is a very suitable place to look for cultural topics in media. So there definitely was an opportunity here to choose and analyze an aspect found in a movie or a TV show.

But when I started to research for my Intercultural Studies, I specifically looked for ways to rudimentarily experience the everyday culture of the United States without actually leaving my home country. I did not just want to look at themes and topics in the entertainment industry, but I wanted to get a greater insight into the life of ordinary people. What might have been more difficult a few years back, is not that much of a problem anymore. Because naturally it has been possible to watch American produced TV shows and movies for decades now and experience cultural aspects through those. But what is rather new is the opportunity to experience the daily life from ordinary people based on user created content which is something that came up with the emergence of the internet and the rise of video platforms like YouTube. Those platforms allow everyone to upload video material of their own producing and choosing.

There is a very diverse offering of user-created content on the internet which makes it possible to somewhat follow the life of ordinary people. That is something that could in general also be experienced through social media. Those networks tend to rely more on text and picture material. However, I chose to look for such content on the video platform YouTube. I figured that video format would transfer the most detailed impressions to the viewer, i.e. myself. Because I wanted to immerse myself into a more ordinary American

culture, I started to explicitly look for video content on YouTube that was created by ordinary people in the United States and that gives me an insight into what their daily life in the American cultural sphere is like.

So for the past months, I have regularly watched the YouTube videos of a young woman named Regan Peruse who is living in Brooklyn and continually creates videos about her reading. Her entire channel, which is called “PeruseProject“, is centered around books. As I am an avid reader myself, I initially enjoyed watching her recommendations on novels. But what made her channel interesting for me in regard to my Intercultural Studies was a video series that she calls “Reading Vlogs“. Those videos are basically video diaries in which she documents her life. They are of course partially focused on the books that she is reading throughout her days, but the largest portions of those videos show impressions about her daily life and her routines. Through those videos I was able to gather at least rudimentarily impressions about what it is like to live in Brooklyn. They provided me as a viewer an audiovisual impression on an ordinary day in her life.

In that way, I have learned that there actually are great similarities between our two cultures. Still, sometimes there were instances when life in the United States seemed quite different. For example due to the vastness of the United States territory. When Regan moved from Chicago to Brooklyn, she recorded parts of the car drive they did from one city to the other which took more than a day.

2.4 American News Coverage

One area of English speaking media that is very close to me is American news coverage. Ever since the unexpected results of the 2016 presidential election, I had developed a keen interest in US politics. That is why reading and watching American news has become something that I do on a very regular basis.

There are of course various ways one could consume news coverage. The most traditional way would be to read a printed newspaper. But the habits of getting news have been much influenced by digital media. Ever since the 1990s, news coverage in the United States has been heavily shaped by the emergence of cable news networks. Studies show that the majority of Americans likes to get their news from television the most.

A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in Summer 2018 found that 47 percent of Americans say that “watching“ is their preferred mode of news consumption. With those

numbers it leads the modes “reading“, which comes at 34 percent, and “listening“, which is the preferred mode by 19 percent (Mitchell). The poll was conducted among 3,425 participants. It further showed that the most popular format for news coverage in the United States was in fact TV (Mitchell). “Just over four-in-ten U.S. adults (44%) prefer TV, compared with about a third (34%) who prefer the web, 14% who prefer radio and 7% who prefer print.“ (Mitchell)

Now, the internet could lead to a decrease of the traditional format of television, just as it does in print journalism regarding newspapers. But the poll by the Pew Research Center found that television remains the overwhelmingly popular choice for those who want to watch their news, whereas for those who want to read their news, the internet has become the majority option. 63 percent of the people who want to read their news do so online, only 17 percent still prefer do it in print (Mitchell).

With platforms like YouTube one could assume that there would be a similar situation when it comes to television, but the numbers show that news shows on television are in a much stronger position. “Among the roughly half of U.S. adults who prefer to watch their news, the vast majority – 75% – prefer the television as a mode for watching; 20% of watchers prefer the web.“ (Mitchell)

That means that even in the digital age of the internet, news consumption via television remains in a very strong position in the United States and thus still are a significant – maybe the most significant – part of American news culture.

When comparing the program of such American networks with German news programs, it became clear to me that there is a different approach in how news are conveyed. German news programs tend to try using a more neutral approach and presenting the news in an objective way – whether that approach is always successfully fulfilled could be a question of debate.

The program on American cable news networks seems to be much more personality based. Shows like “The Rachel Maddow Show“ on MSNBC or “Hannity Report“ on Fox News – which is centered around Sean Hannity – are very much based on their host. Along with that closer connection to the news anchor comes a stronger emphasis on opinion. The host’s own opinion and his or her own political affiliation is much more prominently presented in the American news coverage than it is in German news coverage. Now, you

do of course have personalities in German news programs. But they usually stay away from openly expressing their political affiliations and opinions. And if they do, it is usually made pretty clear that the next segment is a comment and a little detached from the regular news reporting. On the American news shows that I watched, there is no such distinction, the hosts opinion plays a much larger role and is a prominent feature of each news show.

A big difference might lay in the very foundation of the TV stations that those news are conveyed on. In Germany, we have the public stations ARD, ZDF and so on. Those are stations that are paid for through a specific tax. The three biggest cable news networks in the United States are CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. These networks, however, are all operating from the private sector which might make it easier to create a more opinionated program.

Along with the much more opinionated coverage come accusations or impressions of potential biases of those networks. For example, Fox News is widely considered to be heavily tilted towards conservative politics and towards the Republican party. And watching the three networks does in my perspective indeed lay open differences in the way they depict current events. In my impression, the coverage on Fox News seems to be much more sympathetic to the politics of President Trump than on the other two networks.

2.5 Political Town Halls in the United States

What has recently struck me as special, particularly in comparison to Germany, was the regularity in which American politicians seem to do political town halls in which they answer the questions of their constituents. There seems to be a long tradition of political town halls in the United States and much more so than in Germany. A town hall is a meeting in which a politician comes together with voters and then answers to their questions.

The most prominent example of town hall meetings in the United States is probably the town hall style debate that presidential candidates undergo during the election cycle. But the tradition for town halls is actually much bigger than that and what I have found most fascinating is the consistency with which members of the House of Representatives and the Senate go to their respective districts/states and meet with their constituents. Town halls seem to be very popular in the United States and they are especially relevant to Congresswomen and Congressmen who are coming home to the district they are

representing in Washington, DC. The town hall meeting presents an opportunity for both politicians and voters to connect and debate the issues facing the district. And that connection seems to be the core aspect of those town hall meetings and why voters and constituents do participate in them. Because for many people, that is the only chance they get to get their own positions and their own wishes communicated to the politicians who represent them but who spend most of their time in Washington DC which can be a huge distance from their districts. “The town hall debate is now seen as part of the American political tradition. And in a way, it is – a modern innovation cribbed from a much older way to include everyday people in the political process“ (Mansky).

I think it is very interesting to see that sort of access to national politicians for ordinary people. In those town hall meetings, they can ask the questions that they want to ask and can hold their elected officials accountable. There might be equivalences in German politics, but I feel like the tradition of the town hall is something that is uniquely strong in the United States and much more practiced there.

That might be due to the long tradition that town halls have in the US. The earliest recorded town hall meeting in the United States happened on October 8, 1633 in Dorchester, Massachussets (Fabry). “Per the town’s court records, every Monday at the sound of an 8 a.m. bell, townspeople held a meeting to settle and establish ,such orders as my tend to the generall good as aforesayd.’ The decisions made at these meetings were honored as law and ,every man to be bound thereby, without gaynesaying or resistance.’ (Mansky)

The fact that town halls have been happening in the United States for almost 400 years and are thus even older than the official state itself, might be an explanation why it seems to be so deeply built into the political culture of that country.

3. Conclusion

In the end, I really appreciated the writing of this Intercultural Dossier. I am still a little intimidated by the term culture and by trying to make observations about other cultures. Culture is such broad term and while I do acknowledge the existence of it, nothing has changed about my unease when defining other people by the culture they are living in. Keeping in mind the individuality of every single person and also the cultural specifics of

every single community is something that I feel should always be a factor when talking about culture.

My studies have shown me that reflecting on another culture while always keeping in mind the importance of different perspectives can be very fascinating. That is why through my intercultural studies for this Intercultural Dossier, I have tried to include not only my own experiences but different perspectives that I could find. I did not do that in order to discredit my own reflections about those cultural issues, but I think that culture is such a broad and complex term that only a multitude of different perspectives and experiences can bring me or anyone really any closer to an understanding of it.

I also very much enjoyed the more detailed look I was able to take on some cultural specifics of the United States. Prior to my research for this paper, for instance, I had never heard of things like the “key to the city“ and that it is a very common symbolic award in the United States.

My affiliation for the culture of the United States remains very strong after writing this paper and I feel like I will be on intercultural studies for many years to come. One can probably never completely capture the complete culture with all the subcultures of a country, but my interest for the United States is very much alive and I look forward to learning more about the country and the people.

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Plagiarism Statement

I hereby declare that this assignment about *Experiencing American Culture in the Digital Age* is my own work, that I have not used any sources or aids other than the ones listed, and that those parts of the assignment which are based on other works – including electronic media – in wording or content have definitely been marked as such and are accompanied by a bibliographical reference to the source.

Place, date

Signature